COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING ENGLISH GRAMMAR THROUGH SITCOMS

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Abstract: Starting from the hypothesis that Sitcom is a genre that implies both real language phenomena and their motivation, the present paper aims at highlighting the idea that learning English, especially English grammar, using cognitive strategies, based on learners's cognitive abilities to acquire foreign language knowledge, can be combined with the strategies of learning English grammar through sitcoms, which, in their turn, are closely interrelated with the so-called learner autonomy. The paper will show that the approach to learning English grammar through sitcoms can be performed from different perspectives, depending on the instances in which it occurs.

Keywords: sitcom, learning, strategies, cognitive, learner autonomy.

It is generally considered that the learning process cannot be effective without knowing and using the whole spectrum of learning theories, i.e.: behaviorism (a teacher-centered instructional framework), cognitivism (learner viewed as an active participant to the learning process), and constructivism (learners build personal interpretation based on situations, experiences and interactions). The cognitive perspective on learning English grammar tries to put a light on how people acquire, perceive, remember and communicate linguistic information, and the cognitive ability may be defined as the capacity to perform higher mental processes of reasoning, remembering, understanding, and problem solving. Since there is a difference between language and other abilities, there is a close relationship between language and cognition, based on complex similarities and differences.

In the learning process, learners may have their own autonomy in acquiring foreign language knowledge. The idea of learner autonomy is sometimes confused with that of self-instruction and interpreted either as capacity or behaviour, either characterised by learner responsibility or learner control[1].

A foreign language can be tought and learnt through various methods and strategies, including songs, poems, games, role plays or sitcoms.

The word *sitcom* is a distinguished compound formed by putting together parts of two words: situation and comedy. Therefore, a sitcom is a humorous drama based on situations that may occur in everyday life. The situation comedy is considered a genre which initially appeared as a necessity for radio broadcasts, but now is seen as the asset of television.

The sitcom has some distinctive features such as:

- a *small cast of characters*; "Comedy, a cast of recurring stock characters"[2];
- "individual *self-contained episodes* are characteristics of most comedies"[3];
- the length of an episode is around half an hour;

[1] *Benson, P.,Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning. Harlow: Longman/Pearson Education (2001).*
[2] http://nevermindthebllcks.wikispaces.com/file/view/teaching+situation+comedies.pdf
[3] Idem

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- the setting around *typical places* such as: cafeteria, Friends, Home, Office;
- they tackle highly *deep-rooted human flaws.*

Using a sitcom in a lesson, implies the idea that the teacher should think of its positive effect on forming students' competence to communicate in an efficient way[4]. Sitcoms are useful because:

- they have enjoyed *great popularity* both among teachers/educators and students;
- they *develop and improve* students' *listening skills;*
- they improve the quality of students' vocabulary;
- they frame and portray issues, characters on a *humour-based framework;*
- they *maximize students' pronunciation, pitch, rhythm and fluency;*
- they address *vocabulary, grammar, cultural, social* and many other aspects;
- they offer a *huge potential of exploitability;*
- *students* are *motivated* and *interested in the plot, characters, and catchphrases;*
- they are easily *adaptable to teaching objectives.*

The sitcoms have not been created with the second language learner in mind, but having been broadcast on TV around the world, they proved to be valuable as they perfectly render the English language in a totally unaltered way; moreover, these *"Spontaneous authentic materials exhibit the characteristics of natural everyday speech in a way that read-aloud texts do not."*[5]

The sitcoms strongly resort to multiple intelligences as most learners are visually, auditory, cognitively, kinesthetically and interpersonally engaged in these pre/while and post sitcom activities, showing an obvious autonomy. The visual input is supported by visual aid with "*paralinguistic features and extralinguistic information to help develop listening skills; for comprehension activities that stimulate freer production, both oral and written, of language; to practise pronunciation; and to familiarise students with the culture of the target language* "[6].

The real situations show that learners do not understand all words, still we should take into consideration that video resources are a complementarities of stimuli: audio, visual along with many non-linguistic ones, which together contribute to the jigsaw puzzle of the activity. The visual side of sitcoms, besides being fun and language learning motivating, has a dual role: drawing students' attention towards the content, while contributing to a more efficient comprehension encoded both linguistically and non-linguistically[7]. *"Incorporating communicative activities based on the content of the video can encourage a more interactive classroom, one in which the students are pushed to communicate what they have seen and heard in order to complete the task at hand. Video provides foreign language learners insight into the culture of the target language, and allows for the opportunity to question any non-*

[4]Balada, Jan et al. Framework Education Programme for Secondary General Education(Grammar Schools). Prague: Výzkumný ústav pedagogický v Praze, 2007.Metodický portál RVP. Web.
[5] Field, J. 'Finding one's way in the fog: listening strategies and second-language learners', in Modern English Teacher, 2000, Vol 9, no. 1, pp. 29-34.
[6] Walker, S. (1997). Video for young learners,
URL: http://skyscraper.fortunecity.com/networking/68/edtech/aisha2.html;
[7] Retrieved from http://www.hltmag.co.uk/oct12/sart02.htm on January

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verbal aspects of communication that they may not be familiar with. Video can lead to such cross-cultural comparisons to be made."[8]

Linguistically, sitcoms not only enable but also encourage the learner to observe the language and enrich their vocabulary from an "*intensely verbal form of television".* [9]

By not exceeding half an hour, sitcoms allow the teacher and the students to have an entire lesson based on several minutes of watching them, observing and practicing while "present, exemplify, consolidate and revise language"[10]. The use of authentic material is a way of bringing the learners into the real world of the target language.[11] Consequently, exposing the learners to real English language at a normal flow, with its characteristic intonation, fluency and rhythm and not indulging in using just class-made videos that have been slowed down and adapted to the artificial class environment, the learning process combines its cognitive aspect with the learners autonomy. Thus, the vocabulary is enriched and the listening skills are developed, leading to a good acquisition of the English language. Such activities support the learners' needs and maximize their language skills. The teacher's aim is to choose the right episode of a sitcom, or sequence that the students would benefit the most, in order to attain the learning objectives. When students are provided with the appropriate video materials, these do not only boost their self confidence but they also bring along the sense of achievement which is of utmost importance during the learning process. These authentic materials also offer the correct feedback and learning strategy, if the teacher masters the manner of employing it productively and efficiently.

Sitcoms are full of cultural references. Depending on the situation these references might portray regional differences throughout the UK, the British class system, family issues, religion, race and ethnicity, gender issues, social issues, politics and numerous others, and the more the learners know about the culture of the language they are learning - the better their understanding of that language will be.

Since every language is culturally bound, it is obvious that it cannot be learnt in isolation of a target language's culture. Teachers should be aware of the fact that not every modern textbook contains supportive materials for teaching culture. If teachers want to incorporate teaching culture in the lessons, they should make use of authentic materials like sitcoms, which are valuable sources not only for acquiring language through the culture but also for broadening learners' views of people differences, attitudes and beliefs.

Culture is often perceived as making the study of English more attractive and providing a relief from vocabulary and grammar exercises, in other words as standing out of English language learning. Culture is inseparable of language, and together language form the so called linguoculture[12], i.e. language acquisition cannot be accomplished without cultural understanding.

"Teaching English via culture enhances not only a learner's level of proficiency but also contributes to their communicative competence, especially cultural, intercultural and

[8] Stempleski, S. & Tomalin, B. Video in Action: Recipes for Using Video in Language Teaching, Prentice Hall, 1990,
[9]URL REFERENCE Curriculum Corporation, 'Talk about laugh: Situation comedies' URL: http://www.curriculum.edu.au/download/lesspln/talkslp.htm
[10] Idem, ibidem
[11] Cooper, R., Lavery, M. & Rinvolucri, M. Video. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991
[12] Idem, pp. 218-221

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sociolinguistic competences"[13]. English teachers should teach their learners discourse behavior of native speakers in order to realize how they think and see the world. Thanks to teaching culture in English lessons, the teacher encourages the students in international understanding, taking responsibility in the globalised world, and awareness of and respect to cultural differences. "*Cultural education should lead towards acceptance of people of different race, sex, ability, cultural background, origin and religion; moreover, students should respect other people's values, attitudes and beliefs"*[14]. By exploring the target language culture students not only heighten understanding of the foreign culture, but they can also compare foreign culture with their own culture, finding differences and similarities between their culture and the target.

It is generally agreed that a picture is worth a thousand words. The same applies to sitcoms which provide access to a cultural reference about the target language's culture. Sitcoms are a powerful resource for teaching culture since they present "living vibrant people who use the target language for daily communication"[15] from settings such as the stock exchange, court, American suburbia and army life through dressing, table manners, gender roles. Sitcoms familiarize learners with a target culture's sites, authentic discourse, native speakers' lives, and their social behaviours.

Thanks to watching sitcoms, learners encounter various customs, attitudes, beliefs and ways of life; furthermore, they can compare and contrast the culture of English speaking countries with the culture of their mother tongue. Due to learning more about the culture of English speaking country, learners become to understand the language's links to its culture; "the more we know about the culture of the language we are learning - the better our understanding of that language will be"[16]. Sometimes, this way of language acquisition is called "*acculturation model"*[17].

Sitcoms are humorous, and, therefore, under no circumstance, should teachers of languages leave *laughter and humour* out of the class as these *contribute to extremely productive and efficient teaching process*. Long gone are the days when teachers were perceived as rigid spirit modelers and education was conceived as an activity lacked of entertainment. In fact, nowadays textbooks, researches and articles abound about the intricacies and complexity of humour and not surprisingly "*humour is getting to be exploited as a powerful educational tool at these days*." [18]

It has been concluded that *humour alleviates stress and inhibition* while *fostering a positive learning environment, improving student/student/teacher rapport, raising learners' autonomy and interest.* It is said that humour and laughter turn out more areas in our brain, maximize learning and also strengthen memory. To be humorous, you must be smart and ready to take a step back from interpreting the world.

[13] Idem, Ibidem
[14] Idem, 221-226
[15] Herron, Carol et al. "The Effectiveness of a Video-Based Curriculum in Teaching Culture" in The Modern Language Journal, 1999, pp. 518-533
[16] Retrieved from http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/sitcoms-a-tool-elt
[17] Chen, Yiching. "Integrating Authentic Video into Junior College English: An Empirical Study for Situation Comedy." In Humanity and Social Science, 43.2 1998, pp. 21-35.
[18] Retrieved from http://is.muni.cz/th/270029/pedf_m/DIPLOMA_THESIS.txt

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It is often considered that "*humour is a good vehicle for providing authentic cultural information, builds bridges between cultures, practices language items in genuine contexts, develops creative thinking,provides memorable chunks of language, reinforces previously learnt items, enriches textbook-based courses and introduces a refreshing change from routine language-learningprocedures*".[19] Accordingly "*second language speakers may learn vocabulary, syntax, semantics, discourse conventions and culture of the target language via humour*"[20] . A teacher can teach the language of humour in order to make humour accessible for students; and vice versa, the teacher uses humour to make the language accessible.

The type of humour depends on the audience which grasps its meaning:

- ❖ universal humour is usually understood worldwide;
- ❖ culture-bound humour may be understood only by people of certain cultural background or experience;
- ❖ idiosyncratic humour may be understood only by people with the similar sense of humour.

As sitcoms are solely/mainly built on the exploitation of humour, this teaching resource may intensify the learning process: "when watching a sitcom we are not laughing at jokes but at ingredients which are mixed in a particular way".[21]

Most people prefer visual learning style, some prefer either auditory or kinaesthetic learning, or they do not prefer any particular perceptual channels. Sitcoms are a very appealing teaching tool as it conveys visual and verbal elements in the same time. Sitcoms highly overlap the learner styles and certainly this can just positively contribute to the success of the learning activity. Thanks to the *visual element* of the sitcom, learners get familiar with the setting of the plot; they not only learn about the culture of a certain place or country but also have some expectations of how people behave in given *physical surroundings* such as an office, a pub or a shop. Appearances of the characters such as dress, hairstyle and property are other visual components reflecting a character's life style and community belonging, together with *gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body language or proximity*.[22].Regarding the audio elements, including verbal as well as vocal, English teachers should exploit sitcoms in a different way than the audio recordings.

Sitcom is a very powerful tool in English language teaching since it transmits visual and verbal components at the same time. Therefore, if learners misunderstand some parts of the video, they can rely on the visual element in the sitcom. Listening to real conversations with a visual support is generally perceived as more helpful in comparison with audio recordings. Moreover, a visual component of sitcoms puts learners in context of casual conversations. Since a sitcom contains picture and sound simultaneously, it presents the conversational process as a whole.

Starting from the idea that motivation is the art of getting people to do what you want them to do because they want to do it, we have to admit that sitcoms are real *motivation*

[19] Medgyes, Péter. Laughing Maters: Humour in the language classroom. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002
[20] Bell, Nancy D. "Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom" in Language Teaching Research, 13.3 (2009): 241-258. SAGE Journals Online.
[21] Corke, Mike. "Sitcom: Why Audiences Laugh." in The British Comedy Guide. Digital MarkLtd. Web.
[22] Allan, Margaret, Idem, pp. 68-70

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generator resources as they are *playful, verbally teasing and culturally provocative* and thus, they irremediably capture the attention of learners who are lured into a fascinating laughter-filled and humour-based learning process that they become addicted to. The motivational strength of learning English through sitcoms can be explained with the following reasons:

- sitcoms distinguish from other traditional types of teaching materials (course books or audio recordings)
- sitcoms are part of the popular culture
- achievements corelated with exposure to the authentic language
- sitcoms are powerful means for supporting students in autonomous and lifelong learning
- sitcoms deal with issues of modern society
- learners may identify with the sitcom protagonists' experiences[23]
- learners experience sense of entertainment, satisfaction

Motivation is closely linked to a proactive teaching environment in which students are exposed to real English at native-like flow and the sooner we teach students how to "watch" a sitcom, the faster we have shaped intrinsically highly motivated learners capable of learning English language via sitcoms on their own at home, as autonomous learners. English teachers' task is to promote these *learners' autonomy and support self-directed language learning*. Learners should be exposed to authentic English language in order to acquire a communicative competence. A teacher's objective is to make the learners' lexical competence approximate that of native English speakers.By using *authentic video* in lessons, the teacher can enhance *students' perceptive* as well as *productive skills*, i.e. learners may not only understand authentic English but also utilize it in *real communication*. "Real" English vocabulary involves single words and multi-word items which are currently employed in conversational English by native speakers of the language[24] This language is widely colloquial and it is in accordance with the native-like fluency and word usage thus it incorporates a huge amount of spontaneous spoken and written language.

We cannot say that complete and highly formal language should not be taught but however learners need to be able to distinguish between an artificial speaking environment and a real speaking world as this is shortened, abbreviated, concatenated and many other linguistic and phonological processes influence its final shape. For example, we teach our students to respond to the common social formula 'How are you?' with expressions such as 'I'm very well, thank you. And you?', whereas in 'real' (American) English, the answer would be 'I'm good, thanks'. "Responding with the first option will only draw attention to the fact that the speaker does not pragmatically master the English language, whereas, in the second case, (s)he will be approximating the actual conventions of native English speakers."[25]

The best course of action when teaching real English and proposing to upgrade and enrich our students' lexicon, it is to resort to sitcoms as they completely feature this spoken natural language that the English speaking world would use and react to. "*Via watching sitcoms from different English speaking countries students are exposed to a different speaking*

[23] Retrieved from http://is.muni.cz/th/270029/pedf_m/DIPLOMA_THESIS.pdf
[24] Reengineering English Language Teaching: Making the Shift towards 'Real' English; English Language Teaching Journal; 2009; http://www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/elt/article/view/3295
[25] Idem

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speed, tempo, accent, intonation, vocabulary, or slang"[26]. Like any other languages, English has been developing all the time. "*Thanks to its expansion across the world, English has diversified into abundance of forms, varying in pronunciation, intonation, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and usage in different environments"*[27].Though sitcoms, learners become familiar with collocations, phrasal verbs, and means for expressing functions, idiomatic expressions, lexical phrases and acronyms used in nowadays English. According to Sherman "*the sitcom may serve as a language model for specific language item or a general pool for students to pick up from as it provides up-to-date linguistic resource of accents, vocabulary, grammar and syntax*".[28]Teachers can never teach all the words or expressions and idioms in language but they can take advantage of a sitcom as a source of authentic language in their lessons.

It is believed that watching sitcoms enhances language acquisition process; in other words, students make rapid progress in listening comprehension, extension of vocabulary stock and oral production. In addition, learners gain confidence in speech, improve in communicative techniques and produce the message in more effective way. On the other hand, utilizing sitcoms in the English lesson can be frustrating and discouraging, if the students do not understand the language. "*Comprehension of 'real' English may be complicated by high density of language, when there is a lot of speech with little action in the scene; words which do not match the action; quick speed of the speech; swallowing the words; unfamiliar dialects and regional accents; background noise; and a high degree of naturalism in the speech, for instance overlap in speech, mumbling or characters with their backs to the camera*" [29]. Learners, especially elementary ones would appreciate visual support and unambiguous action, where there is a close link between what the picture shows you and what is said; clearly pronounced speech in standard accents; and anything which slows down the diction. Chen believes that "*providing a learner with comprehensible input, which is slightly above the learner's language level, is crucial in acquiring the English language*".[30]

In conclusion, taking advantage of sitcoms in the English lessons can be highly beneficial since learners are exposed to authentic language. Perception and comprehension of modern English expressions lead to practice of these words and phrases in oral as well as written production. As a result, students' communicative competence in English becomes closer to native speakers'. Despite the fact that there are some obstacles in the clear comprehension of 'real' English, teachers can arrange the lesson around the sitcom in a way which would lead to progress in learners' language acquisition.

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[26] Idem
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[29] Idem
[30] Chen, Yiching, op.cit.

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