

## Digital Media as Pedagogical Tools in the Language Classroom

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### Abstract

The efficacy of authentic materials, particularly films and songs in language teaching is well documented (Chapple & Curtis, 2000). Digital media provide learners in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts with exposure to language as it is used for real-world communication. It also affords them with opportunities to “engage ... in the kinds of cognitive processes that arise in communication outside the classroom” (Ellis, 2003, p. 336). With digital technology gaining ground in educational spaces, teachers have at their disposal a variety of digital media that they can employ to teach language in an engaging manner. Drawing on practical classroom applications of authentic materials with culturally and linguistically diverse groups of ESL/EFL learners, this article discusses some digital media that can be used to teach various skills and aspects of language. It also provides a set of criteria that need to be borne in mind while choosing authentic materials for language teaching. The article concludes with a brief discussion of how digital media can encourage translanguaging practices.

**Keywords:** Digital media, films and songs, authentic materials, ESL/EFL context

### Introduction

Digital technology has become an integral part of our daily existence and the Covid-19 pandemic has underlined its ubiquitous presence not only in our personal lives but in our professional spaces as well. One field that has been particularly impacted in this period, is education.

While media has always had a role to play in language teaching—from realia in the classroom or the use of print media such as cartoon strips, comics, advertisements, to audio and audio-visual media such as songs, broadcasts, podcasts, films, YouTube, online language learning tools and social media—emergent technological innovations are constantly offering teachers with new tools and opportunities to use digital media in the classroom.

With the growth of the internet, an increasing number of language learners across the world have access to digital media either through a smartphone or a computer and use it to watch videos and films, to listen to music to play digital games and to communicate with others through social media websites. This has spawned a generation of learners who cannot imagine a world without the internet prompting Prensky (2001) to coin the term ‘digital natives’ to refer to “native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). He also coined the term ‘digital immigrants’ to refer to the teachers of these digital natives as they have to acquire digital literacy as adults (p. 1). While the use of devices and access to the internet and digital media is growing exponentially, it is important to note that this ‘net generation’ (Tapscott, 2008) is not entirely a global phenomenon. In many countries, including developed ones, a ‘digital divide’ still exists, i.e., access to, and use of mobile devices, computers, and the Internet are linked to geographical or socio-economic background (Erlam et al., 2021). Nevertheless, language learners of all ages find the use of digital media particularly motivating because it caters to their interest and needs while presenting *authentic* language, i.e. language as it is used in real-time.

### **Authenticity**

“Authentic texts are those that have been created to achieve specific social purposes in the language community where they were created” (Raman & Vijaya, 2021). They present the learner with language as it is used for real-world communicative purposes rather than language that has been simplified or created for pedagogic purposes. The use of authentic material in language learning has been debated from the time of Sweet (1899) to the recent past. With the advent of Communicative Language Teaching, the use of such materials has gained traction as it encourages actual communication rather than mere knowledge of

structure. Using authentic materials empowers learners to carry out real-world communication. They are therefore motivated to learn language and often are more willing to take risks as the emphasis is on meaning-making and communicating a message. A further advantage of authentic materials is that it exposes the learner to the culture of the target language community in a naturalistic manner. Finally, it presents a creative approach to language teaching and learning.

The use of authentic materials in language teaching is supported by a number of studies (Tschirner, 2011; Baharani & Sim, 2012; Kaiser, 2011; Golden, 2001; Ryan, 1998). Some of the advantages of using authentic materials are: (i) they increase the motivation levels of learners. Melvin and Stout (1987), showed that using authentic materials not only raised students' motivation but also led to an increase in their confidence. It helped them to gain an understanding of the actual benefits of being able to use language for real-world needs. Nunan (1999) and Gilmore (2007) hold that exposure to a variety of authentic material motivates learners as they can relate to the content and subject matter; (ii) the fun element in cartoons and films lowers the affective filter (Krashen, 1981), students are actively engaged and information is presented in a non-threatening atmosphere (Doring, 2002; Rule & Ague, 2005; Ismaili, 2013). When the affective filter is lowered, learners participate freely in discussions and do not hesitate to express themselves.

Closely aligned to the notion of authenticity and authentic materials is the task-based language teaching (TBLT) approach. Real-world tasks are central to the process of learning in TBLT. According to Ellis "A task is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real-world" (p. 16). Tasks are grounded in situations that are relevant and interesting to learners and have a meaning-focus. Successful task completion requires learners to comprehend, manipulate and interact in the target language (Raman & Vijaya, 2021). Such interactions which focus both on meaning and form, facilitate language acquisition. Digital media provides a unique platform for language learning in that it exposes students to authentic language use and can be woven seamlessly into the task-based approach.

### **Media in Language Teaching**

Media literacy research has revealed that the strategies used by a proficient reader of a printed text are similar to those used by the

viewer of a visual text (Golden, 2001). While negotiating printed or visual materials, learners make connections, predictions, ask questions, and interpret what they read or see. Meaning is arrived at through an understanding and analysis of the characters, theme of the text, story plot, mood of the text and its characters, the inherent conflict.

This article discusses the use of digital media, specifically, films, songs, TED talks, interviews and podcasts to teach English. Though the teaching-learning context in this case is English, these media resources can be used to teach any language. The activities and choice of media have emerged from years of praxis with two learner groups studying at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad. The first group includes ESL learners enrolled in the Undergraduate programmes in English and foreign languages such as Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, French and German. They were a heterogeneous class in terms of language proficiency which ranged from A2 - C1. The other group consists of adult professionals from countries such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Syria, Palestine, Mozambique, Mongolia, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Belarus and Sudan. As a part of the International Training Programme run by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, these professionals, who hold key positions in governmental and non-governmental organizations in their home countries, attend an intensive three-month progress-to-proficiency course in English at the university with a view to improving their overall language skills (Raman & Vijaya, 2021). The use of authentic materials, both in print and digital form have proven to be effective with both these learner groups. As mentioned earlier, in this paper the discussion is restricted to the use and efficacy of films, songs, TED talks, interviews and podcasts.

**Films and film clips** form an extremely popular resource for language teaching. "Film is much more readily accessible than print because of the visual nature and immediacy of the medium, but the very things that films do for us, good and active readers have to do for themselves" (Golden, 2001). This feature makes it more entertaining for learners when compared to print materials. Films depict cross-cultural values, facilitate the development of critical thinking, and serve as a valuable source of language input (Chapple & Curtis, 2000). Additionally, they also provide opportunities for language output which is essential for the development of oral communication skills. Finally, films provide

exposure to usage (fixed expressions, colloquialisms, redundancy in spoken form, etc.) which may not be available in classroom interaction (Raman & Vijaya, 2016).

Films are easily available on various streaming platforms today, and while it may not be possible for a teacher to screen the entire film, it is possible to curate clips from a variety of sources. One such popular source is YouTube. Short clips can be played in class and students can be asked to watch them and complete tasks based on the film clip. Given below is an example of a film clip and the accompanying task (Raman & Vijaya, 2016).

The courtroom scene from the film *A Few Good Men* starring Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson was accompanied by pre- and post-listening comprehension tasks. The script for the same scene was provided to students to practise intonation and word and sentential stress patterns. Imagining themselves to be the characters in the scene, they had to practise and deliver the dialogues as closely to the original as possible. They recorded themselves at regular intervals and this helped them understand the subtle nuances of stress and intonation and how it can affect meaning, the use of contracted forms, and elisions in spoken language. In addition, it captured their progress over time, helped them shed their inhibitions and encouraged them to perform in front of an audience. Films like *To Sir with Love*, *Shawshank Redemption*, *The King's Speech*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, can be used to expose learners to language varieties such as British, American, Australian English, etc. and engage them in discussions on differences in stress, pronunciation, intonation and vocabulary. Learners can also pay attention to those aspects of their own English that require improvement so that they are intelligible to other non-native/native speakers of the language.

**Songs** form another entertaining yet effective resource for language learning. Through songs, learners' awareness of rhyme and rhythm can be raised in a fun and absorbing manner. Songs, including those from films, are available on YouTube and can be downloaded or streamed directly. They are also available with and without captions. By virtue of being short, they can be played multiple times in class. Singing songs as a group works well with young and adult learners. Animation films and songs from these films are an effective medium as they make extensive use of puns, phrasal verbs collocations and a variety of

accents. Some very popular animation films for classroom use include *Shrek*, *Madagascar*, *Ice Age*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Lion King*, *Kung Fu Panda*, and, *101 Dalmatians*. These films also stimulate absorbing discussions on character and values and encourage students to develop alternative ways of thinking and problem-solving.

An example of how songs can be used in class is the use of the song *I Just Can't Wait to be King* from the animated film *Lion King* that was used to teach vocabulary: fixed expressions (“vacant expressions”, “lights are not all on upstairs”, “heart-to-heart”); rhyme (wing, sing, fling); and phrasal verbs (brush up, brush off). The items to be taught were blanked out and students were asked to fill in the blanks after viewing the clip. They had chances to refine their guesses and were also asked to explain their choices. This provided them with valuable input on how to exploit contextual clues that were both present in the lyrics and the visuals. Other songs which work to great effect are *Bare Necessities* from *Jungle Book*, *Can't Stop This Feeling!* from *Trolls*, *I Have a Dream* by ABBA, *Just the Way You Are* by Bruno Mars, *Perfect* and *I'm in Love with the Shape of You* by Ed Sheeran and *We are the Champions* by the British band Queen to name a few. In addition to focusing on particular aspects such as grammar and vocabulary, learners can also be asked to reflect on the title of the song, the meaning it conveys, the emotions of the characters and the mood of the song. They can even be asked to add another verse or write another song in response.

**TED talks, interviews and podcasts** are resources that teachers can use to practise listening comprehension and speaking skills. For very long, listening and speaking were not a part of the language syllabus in India. Though they have now been included in the syllabus and feature in school and college-level textbooks, the reality is that listening activities tend to be ignored in a majority of Indian classrooms. Whenever they are, listening tasks are limited to commonplace texts like news reports, weather forecasts and interviews and discussions created for pedagogic purposes. This is where TED talks, interviews and podcasts provide an interesting alternative. They provide learners with exposure to authentic samples of language use and learners can see how effective speakers use language for a variety of purposes. They are easily accessible via mobile phones and unlike film clips consume less bandwidth. Like songs, they are short and therefore effective for classroom use. Talks by famous personalities on a wide range of topics are available for use. For

example, the TED talk by Chimamanda Adichie: *The danger of a single story* was used in class to highlight the nature of stereotyping. Since this activity was conducted during the pandemic and classes were online, the link to the talk was shared in the chat box. Learners listened to the talk and attempted a quiz, that was created using an online tool, to check their listening comprehension and guess the meaning of new vocabulary using contextual clues. Later, a discussion on the topic of stereotyping and how such biases can be overcome was conducted. Other popular TED talks that can be used are those by Simon Sinek's *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*, Sir Ken Robinson's *Do Schools Kill Creativity?* Amy Cuddy's *Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are*.

**Web series** on Netflix and Amazon Prime became popular sources of entertainment during the pandemic. One trend that caught on was that of people watching films and series made in languages different from their own such as Turkish, Spanish, Italian and Korean films and web series. These platforms can be used for language learning because they resonate with young and adolescent learners, and they can be asked to talk about a series of their choice. The teacher can motivate them to write about characters they like and how they would like a particular season of a series to end or a new season to begin. Post-watching activities can also include vocabulary work, especially when languages like English and Spanish are taken into account.

An example of this would be an episode from a Spanish series, *Velvet* (2013-16). After watching an episode or two, learners will notice that many Spanish words are closely related to English words and that a particular ending acts as a suffix. For instance, *absolutely* in English is *absolutamente* in Spanish. Similarly, *regularly* in English is *regularmente* in Spanish. Examining more examples, it becomes evident that 'mente' at the end of Spanish adverbs is the equivalent of the English suffix '-ly'. Similarly, it is also possible to examine the phenomenon of false friends across language, e.g. *decepción* in Spanish means *disappointment* while *fábrica* means *factory*.

### Choosing Materials: Some Criteria

While choosing authentic materials such as films, songs and talks and web series for language teaching some of the most important criteria to bear in mind are:



(i) **Clarity:** This is particularly relevant while choosing songs. Teachers should ensure that the music does not drown out the lyrics of the song. The words should be clearly enunciated and audible to learners. If the song is too fast, learners may not be able to hear the words properly and this could prevent them from completing the task leading to frustration. While choosing films too, it may be a better idea to choose films where the accent is more intelligible and speech slightly slower especially when dealing with beginner level learners.

(ii) **Degree of difficulty of the language:** The language of the songs and films should be within the reach of learners. The language they are exposed to should be suited to their level and should be relevant to their needs.

(iii) **The length of the song:** The song chosen should not be too long. It is important to remember that in our context, many learners may not be used to listening to songs in English. Added to this is the fact that they are listening to it in a classroom setting and for pedagogic purposes which requires them to pay attention and be focused, both of which are often not natural processes involved in listening to music. Songs that have repetitive stanzas (*Hole in the Bucket* by Harry Belafonte) are extremely useful with beginners as it allows for the learning of relevant grammatical and lexical items.

(iv) **Exploitability of the content:** The content of the film clip, song, TED talk, etc. is important as these are being used to teach a particular aspect or skill of language. It is necessary for teachers to identify the needs of the learner and ascertain whether the material chosen is relevant to and can be exploited adequately to teach a particular skill.

(v) **Cultural appropriacy:** Since authentic material exposes learners to the culture of the target language, it is vital to ensure that the material reflects aspects of culture that students can relate to while at the same time learning something new. It should not be too alien or unfamiliar as this can demotivate learners.

## Conclusion

The digital media discussed in this article pertains specifically to authentic materials. The various types described here are not exhaustive and teachers and learners have opportunities to explore social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram to develop



writing skills, particularly collaborative writing. Learning Management Systems also can be used in a similar manner. While authentic materials such as those mentioned here promote language learning that is meaningful and engaging, it is worth pointing out that they also provide opportunities for translanguaging, which can be defined as an “educational effort that takes into account and builds further on the diversity of languages and literacy practices that children and youth bring to school” (Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas & Torres-Guzman (2006, p. 14). Teachers can adopt a functional approach to language use and exploit the cultural references in films to introduce authentic reading material to familiarize students with other cultures. For instance, after watching episodes of a historical series like *The Mongols*, learners can compare and contrast aspects of Mongolian culture, way of life, and customs to their own. They can engage in discussions using their own languages. In this process, they draw upon their own cultural repertoires and in doing so, value and develop their own identities. Viewed through a larger lens, what emerges is not just a learner engaged in the business of learning a language but an individual aware of the finer nuances of the language and using it to *communicate*.

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