

Using TV Commercials and Imagery for Vocabulary Development

Teachers use videos in language classes for various reasons, to add a sense of authenticity, to make the lesson more interesting, to introduce a specific topic, and so on. But simply using video does not automatically eliminate those seemingly endless problematic choices teachers must make. Should the focus be fluency? How will students understand meaning? What about classes with mixed levels? Should teachers provide the material or should students generate it? What about feedback and carry-over? How can students use the material? Is it possible to evaluate their performance? How do students demonstrate their understanding? Do students have the opportunity to personalize the material?

I have found that one of the greatest benefits of video, besides piquing students' interest, is when meaning is provided through imagery. I have also found that television commercials are excellent sources of this meaning through imagery. They are also short enough to allow detailed exploration, even under time constraints.

The series of activities that I am going to introduce in this paper revolve around a commercial for *Bugle Boy* clothing. But the process can be applied to any video clip that has close correlation between what is being said and what is being shown.

Here is the complete script of this commercial. It is chanted like a rap song:

Different blood types.

Different color.

Different windows.

Different weaknesses.

Individuals.

Different education, names, race, voices, frequencies.

Different borders.

Different talents.

Different fears, signs.

Different hero, gods, nationalities.

Different schools of thought, emotions.

Different moves, combinations.

Different bodies.

Different statements.

Bugle Boy.

Bugle Boy, a common thread...

As you watch the commercial, scenes of young people in Bugle Boy clothing is interspersed with images that match the underlined words. For instance, you see a microscopic view of blood going through vessels, "blood types"; then 4 people of difference race, "color"; a close-up of an eye, "windows"; some glasses and an eye chart, "weaknesses"; fingerprints, "individuals"; and so on.

I begin the lesson by telling students we are going to watch a commercial and I give them a few details about it. Then I hand out at random 24 lexical items in English on cards and the

Japanese “translations” on 24 other cards. After a demonstration how to hunt down your “translations” students go around the room and when they make a match, they go together and write the English and Japanese together on the board. This is the first step to provide meaning for the items. Higher-level classes may not need this step. Or you could make concentration cards for groups of students.

Then we watch the video and I have students simply see if they can catch some of the words, writing what we come up with on the board. Then I pass out a cloze of the commercial’s script and students try to fill in the blanks. Lower-level classes have the Japanese translation on the cloze but I erase the Japanese on the board. I have also tried erasing the English and having intermediate students work together to recall them. Because this particular video has so many items, I tell students that they will have ample opportunity to catch the words. After listening, I often ask students how I can help them. Sometimes, I replay the video in shorter sections, give them clues, read the script myself, have the class offer the items, and so on. In short, I try to scaffold the activity to try to match students’ ongoing feedback.

If I have a 90-minute class, I continue with the next step. This is to begin matching the words and their images. On the lower half of the cloze there are lines numbered 1 through 24. As the items are heard, I stop the video and show the frame. As a class, we try to decide what the image is. For “blood types” students said, “blood,” and I offered “blood vessels.” Students write this. And we continue through the video until the last frame were the image for “common thread” is “a ruler,” or “a tape measure.”

The next step is to use the items or the images to create a question. On a separate handout, the 24 items are listed with space for writing a question. The question-writing procedure depends on the level of students. For high-beginners, I ask students to do 2 or 3 questions in pairs. For intermediate or higher students, they can do 4 or 5 or more. After students have finished, I gather the questions. After the class, I choose and edit one for each of the 24 items, and I copy these 24 questions on the back of the second handout. A blank is placed before the questions so students can then ask classmates the questions and keep a record of whom they talked to.

Results from this part of the Bugle Boy Series are often surprising. Lower-level students often come up with interesting questions. For example, “What’s my blood type? If you don’t know, what do you think?” Or, “Do you like your eyes? Why or why not?” Intermediate students, with their higher language ability, often make more complex questions like, “What do you think is the worst weakness of human beings?” or “How’d you feel if you were discriminated against because of skin color?” and “What would you teach about Japan to other nationalities?”

As a final activity, I take the 24 questions, sometimes adding others from previous classes if the class is large. Then I print each question in large lettering on A4 paper. In the next class, students take the pages and make a large “*classroom gameboard*.” Then, in pairs, they go around the board and use the questions as conversation starters. In the dozen or so times I have done this activity, I have never felt students tiring of this activity, even for a full 45 minutes.

Though this series of activities might seem complex, an interesting, imagery-filled commercial and a word processor can result in students increasing their vocabulary, investing in language production, developing autonomy, and interacting in a beneficial way, even in mixed-level groups.

—Duane Kindt