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Developing Video Support Material for Self-Access Language Learning

Nathan Mills

Abstract

Self-access learning often involves the use of authentic materials like newspapers and films. However, for students to fully benefit from such materials, language learning support materials are also needed. There are two main types of support materials: specific materials support the use of a single piece of authentic material; global materials support many pieces of authentic material. Each type serves a different purpose. This study focuses on the production of specific support material for video films at a Thai university. The materials design process involved several stages of piloting, feedback, and redesign. Although there are practical concerns, it is possible to develop specific support materials that motivate users and have a long shelf life.

Keywords: Authentic material /Film/ Self-Access Language
Learning/Specific support material/Video

Introduction

Self-access learning centers (SALC) are designed to provide language learners with opportunities for independent study. A particularly popular section of many SALCs is the video corner, which usually offers many kinds of video materials, one of which is popular films. Learners can watch films on videocassette, DVD, or VCD, alone or with friends, depending on the set up of the center. This facility provides an element of entertainment, in addition to language practice, which may account for the popularity of most video corners.

This paper will look at the advantages of providing video support material for self-access learners and at the drawbacks the learners face particularly with authentic video material. It will show how a solution to the problems with authentic material is the provision of support materials and will debate the pros and cons of different kinds of support materials. The paper will then describe a research project in which worksheets were used to support the use of target language feature films with a small group of learners of English as a Foreign Language at a Thai university.

Video Materials for Self-Access Learners

A video corner normally has a range of videos, some of which may include subtitles in the users' native tongue or in the target language. Videos may be those produced specifically for language instruction or they may be authentic material such as recordings of news broadcasts, TV shows, or feature films. Authentic material (also known as authentic text) is most commonly defined as material that was intended for some other use besides language learning (Dickinson, 1987, p. 68).

Authentic Video Materials: Advantages and Drawbacks

Authentic videos can be a valuable tool for language learning. One advantage is that they can provide samples of real-life situations. Language learners can use videos to study how language use may be determined by age, relationship between characters, and social status. They can also provide examples of how to express moods and feelings, adding words to paralinguistic features.

Authentic videos can be more motivating than other forms of authentic material. Baddock (1996, p.22) states that "the effort to make sense of [videos]" is worthwhile because people generally like watching videos and the popularity of movies in pop culture basically attracts learners. They are simply more entertaining as they include music and setting elements which are aspects learners enjoy, and they can provide topics and ideas for people to discuss (Christopher & Ho, 1996, p.86). Feature films on video may lack the form or structure found in commercialized videos prepared for language teaching; however, they do increase motivation and activate learners' background knowledge which

promotes language acquisition (Little et al., 1989, p.26).

Despite their benefits, authentic material may be difficult to use alone. The major drawback is that they are normally not accompanied by support material (Gardner & Miller, 1999, pp.101-102). However, this can be overcome by producing in-house support materials.

Gardner (1994, pp.106-108) identifies current problems with using videotape in self-access on both practical and pedagogical levels. He suggests that it is difficult for learners to find specific locations on a tape. Another problem is the risk of learners becoming passive viewers. He states that activities that provide opportunities for active viewing "which leads to focused language learning...should be available to self-access users but frequently are not" (p. 108). One solution is to create support material that breaks up a video into manageable sections so that learners only have to search within a section instead of an entire video; this helps to ensure that learners view actively.

Where support material is not provided for the videos in a SALC, it might be assumed the users set their own learning objectives. However, it seems likely that most users do not consider language points or learning strategies when they watch a film but instead watch mainly for enjoyment. Their objective then is to understand the film and this should be kept in mind when designing support material.

If comprehension is not easy, enjoyment is reduced. As soon as the users realize they cannot follow the plot, they tend to switch off mentally (Baddock, 1996, p.4). Film-viewing of this kind does not provide any benefits; thus, support material is needed to aid comprehension.

It is important to distinguish between aiding comprehension and testing it. Lonergan (1984, p.11) suggests video support material should do the former not the latter. Allan (1985, p.48) concurs by stating that the objective of the video support material is to "guide the learners to concentrate on the main points and help follow the...plot step by step." The distinction between comprehension and testing is important in deciding which kind of support materials to create.

Global Versus Specific Support Materials

Gardner and Miller (1999, p.109) define two categories of self-access materials, global and specific which have different purposes. The aim of a global worksheet is to provide "language-learning procedures which learners can use many times." A global worksheet saves a lot of time because one single worksheet can be used for all films. It is also more economical as it requires less paper than a specific worksheet. A specific worksheet, however, aims to practice specific language items and is created for use with a single film. It takes longer to create since it requires more detail than a global worksheet, thus costing more because it is normally longer than a global worksheet.

However, the differences between these two choices of support material go much deeper than time and cost. Global worksheets tend to test user's comprehension of a film whereas specific worksheets prepare users before watching and/or aid comprehension during watching. The questions in a global worksheet are very general and often can be answered without even watching the film. Many of the answers could be found by reading the synopsis on the back of the videocassette

cover. Users whose objective is to understand the story need specific support material because it is targeted at comprehension of a specific film.

Specific support material includes questions directly related to the characters and plot of the particular film it was made for. The questions can be used to "teach" the users but not to "test" them. Nuttall (1982, pp.125-128) exemplifies how questions can aid comprehension. In reading, it is common for learners to read a text with no preparation, not understand, struggle with the questions that follow, and then read the passage again. However, during the second reading, the learner comes to understand the text. The questions were what helped bring understanding. Nuttall states that "the questions that help [learners] understand are the ones that make [them] work at the text." In the same way, specific support material can turn film-viewing into an active process, again reducing the risk of creating passive viewers.

Both global and specific support materials have their uses for self-access learners and a good SALC would make use of both. However, if students come to use the video corner because they want to watch and understand a film, specific worksheets are the most appropriate. They can help students learn vocabulary, as it is used in pop culture, successfully follow the plot, and have a sense of achievement when the film finishes. Global worksheets, on the other hand, are quite limited in the ability to improve vocabulary, aid comprehension, or motivate students.

The Research Project

The research project described here took place in the video corner of the SALC of King Mongkut's University of

Technology Thonburi in Bangkok, Thailand. The purpose of the project was to create film-specific support material for self-access learners. The material was tested with three groups of second-year undergraduate students from a variety of majors. Five students were in each group. Two groups consisted of three males and two females each while the third group consisted of three females and two males. The two films for which support materials were created (*City of Angels* and *There's Something about Mary*) were chosen because they were two of the most popular videos in the SALC at the time of the research. However, none of the subjects had previously seen the films.

The research was conducted with three sequential groups of subjects, which allowed formative feedback to improve the materials for the next group. Each subject completed a questionnaire (see Appendix B) and each group was interviewed after viewing the video and using the support material. The interview was conducted because it seemed the subjects did not answer the questions thoroughly. The purpose of the interview was to clarify the answers in the questionnaires and extract more information that could be used to help improve the support material. The interview was unstructured, as questions depended on the answers given in the questionnaires, and conducted by the researcher along with a Thai interpreter to allow subjects to express themselves more freely.

Group 1 viewed *City of Angels* using the first version of the support material. Group 2 also viewed *City of Angels* but using support materials modified as a result of Group 1's feedback. A completely new set of support material was designed using lessons learned from the feedback of groups

1 and 2. This was used by Group 3 as they viewed *There's Something about Mary*.

The Support Materials

Before viewing the film, the subjects read a short synopsis, which included an introduction to the main characters and cultural background of the story. Difficult vocabulary items were listed with a definition and if possible, a short snippet of dialog directly from the film, exemplifying how the items were used in context. The pre-viewing section also included a list of questions specific to the story which subjects were expected to answer *while* they watched the film.

The support material was divided into four parts to allow the users more flexibility in case they wanted to stop and continue watching on a different day. Each part related to a section of the film of between 25 and 35 minutes and included vocabulary items found within that section and 5 to 8 questions. The screenwriting principle of "plot points" was used to determine the film sections. Plot points are defined as dramatic events in the plot that take the story in a new or different direction (Field, 1998). The plot points should be easy to recognize, if not, the story may be too difficult for the users to follow.

Though the main objective of the support material is to aid comprehension, it also aims to develop listening skills and vocabulary acquisition. Since the users read the questions before viewing and see the three alternative answers, they are practicing listening for specific information, gist, and details of content. As for vocabulary, they see the word in citation form (isolated/without context) to aid long-term memory and then are provided with an example of it in use to aid recognition.

Findings

The feedback from the subjects was quite positive. A clear majority stated that reading the questions before viewing helped them follow the plot more easily, the support material helped them understand more quickly, and they would use this form of support material again if it was made available. Further evidence for the value placed by subjects on the support material was shown when the subjects in Group 3 all chose to make copies of the support material for personal use because they found its numerous expressions and vocabulary worth learning and remembering. This unprompted action indicates that these specific support materials are valued because they provide language learning by providing language items relevant to learners' needs and wants.

Feedback from subjects also indicated that support material should not be turned into an exercise, especially the vocabulary section and that it should be as least intrusive as possible as they preferred to *watch* the film, not stare at a piece of paper. After some experimentation with question types in earlier versions, multiple choice questions were used exclusively as they were least intrusive and quicker to answer. Subjects' feedback also indicated listening for the overall meaning was easier and more desired than listening for specific dialogue or words.

These two pieces of feedback influenced considerably the development of the support materials. Below is an example from the support material for *City of Angels* showing how the question format changed. This seemingly small change made the support materials less intrusive, as they could be used (i.e., answered) more quickly and easily, switching the focus from

listening for specific words to listening for overall meaning.

First Version of Question 4

In the operating room, what does Dr. Rice say she wants from Nathan Messenger?

"No dying on me now Mr. Messenger, not until you give me Seth's."

Revised Version of Question 4

In the operating room, what does Dr. Rice say she wants from Nathan Messenger?

- a) *Seth's phone number.*
- b) *She wants Nathan to introduce her to Seth.*
- c) *She wants Nathan to promise her that he won't die.*

Discussion and Recommendations

Choosing Films

If the material designer chooses the right film, the time spent creating the support material would be worthwhile and it would have a long shelf life. For example, the film *City of Angels* was two years old when it was used for this research and, even though it was the most popular video in KMUTT's SALC at the time, many KMUTT learners had not seen it. The film's popularity combined with the large number of potential new viewers ensures the support material will be well used.

The following guidelines can be used to decide what film would merit support material:

- It should be popular in the theatre and also in the SALC.
- It should feature famous actors or actresses because famous names attract SALC users.
- It should have clear plot points.
- The story line should be linear, not fluctuating chronologically.

- Films with dialog that rely on heavy use of technical terms or contain excessive slang and idioms should be avoided.
- All genres are acceptable.

Creating Specific Support Material

During this study, some experimentation produced the most efficient approach to creating support material. The following steps can minimize frustration and time consumption:

- While watching the film the first time, list the vocabulary words in chronological order on one side of a page. Choose words that are essential to the main plot of the story or would be useful to learners outside the classroom in real communication. One set of support material should have about thirty to forty terms. After watching the film, determine where the plot points are.
- During the second viewing, use a clock or watch and mark the time of each plot point. Separate the vocabulary into sections. Use the space on the other side of the page to write down ideas for questions.
- Next, organize the vocabulary and questions on a word-processor (a template would be useful). Then view quickly a third time (skipping through the film using fast forward) to check whether the examples of how certain vocabulary items as used in the context are correct.

The above procedure takes around five hours, which is a reasonable investment for continued use of materials over several years.

Structure and Type of the Questions and Answers

Since the subjects were expected to answer quickly without stopping the video,

it was important to help them match a question with the correct moment of the story. This was done by restructuring the questions so a question like:

What does Dr. Rice say she wants from Nathan Messenger while she was operating on him?

was restructured to begin with a prepositional phrase, indicating the *setting* in which the subjects could find the answer, as follows:

In the operating room, what does Dr. Rice say she wants from Nathan Messenger?

The purpose of restructuring the question in this manner was to focus the subjects' attention when the setting opens in an operating room. Although it is difficult to prove that restructuring questions prevented the subjects from becoming lost when using the support material and viewing the video simultaneously, it seems reasonable to suggest that signaling the *time* and *setting* elements of the story helped them match the questions with events in the story. Support material designers should also consider how much help to provide in this way. Such considerations will relate to the desired difficulty level of the questions.

It is also recommended that the questions relate only to the main story line of the film. Since the aim of the support material is to help the users understand the film, and the subjects indicated that they preferred questions dealing with the overall meaning of the scene, questions related to minor details or sub-plots within the film may not be useful for specific support material.

Each question used in this study provided three possible answers. The

distractors were designed to appear plausible to subjects having difficulty following the film. Clearly, the plausibility of the distractors should reflect the language level of the target users. Materials intended for beginners, for example, should contain distractors which are unrelated to the scene or context of the question to make them easy to identify.

Because the subjects indicated a preference for questions about overall meaning, answers to questions that draw a conclusion from a scene or conversation between characters could be paraphrased.

Introducing Support Material to a SALC

During this research, the subjects had trouble understanding the instructions, but perhaps the problem was partly to do with the novelty of using specific support material. SALC users may be reluctant to use support material if they are unfamiliar with the concept. They may mistakenly view it as a difficult and time-consuming procedure. The concept of specific support material may be so new that users require extensive learner training. This can include introducing the concept, explaining the benefits, demonstrating the materials and providing step-by-step instructions for use. The materials can be introduced by providing information about their ease of use and benefits (for example, in the users' native language posted around the campus). Also, if the SALC is linked to a traditional learning program, classroom teachers could inform students about the materials. In addition to information about the material, instructions on how to use it should be made available (possibly in the native language).

Conclusion

Motivation is a major reason why film-specific support material is beneficial. Users are more likely to use material that was made for a particular film. Knowing that the material would help them follow the film would motivate them to use it more than a global worksheet. Using the same generic worksheet for different films may quickly bore users. On the other hand, users who need the more controlling specific support material at the beginning could be encouraged later to move to global material that encourages them to be more autonomous learners.

Specific support material does not necessarily have to be implemented on paper. An electronic version is possible and has already been tried. Gardner and Blasco-García (1996) and Gardner (1999) have created computer versions where questions appear on the screen. Each question is related to what is happening in the film at that moment.

Users of self-access centers should not be left without support. Support material is a necessary accompaniment to authentic material. Global worksheets, though easier and quicker to make, ignore those users whose objective is understand a video film and be entertained. There is a need for both specific and global worksheets, as well as benefits for using both. It is possible to create specific support material for films in a reasonable amount of time, and if created for the right film, it would be used for several years. The material would not interrupt the users' viewing pleasure, thus creating a sense of achievement when they are finished, increasing motivation, and promoting language acquisition.

The Author

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Appendix A

Below is a sample (introduction/instructions page plus Act I) from the specific support material created for the film *City of Angels*.

CITY OF ANGELS**CHARACTERS**

Seth—Nicolas Cage

Dr. Maggie Rice—Meg Ryan

Nathan Messenger—Daniel Franz

Cassiel (Seth's friend)

Jordan (Maggie's boyfriend)

SYNOPSIS

City of Angels is about an angel named *Seth* (Nicolas Cage) who falls in love with *Dr. Maggie Rice* (Meg Ryan). When Seth meets *Nathan Messenger* (Daniel Franz), he learns how he can become a man and be with the Doctor.

Instructions:

You may write in this material. You will need a pen or pencil, and a watch or clock. The material is divided into four parts (Act I, Act II (1,2), and Act III) to help you manage your own time. The *pre-view* section of each Act is to be done before watching the film or a particular Act. You can work on one Act at a time or do all three Acts at once.

Act I: 16 minutes

Act II: Part One: 37 minutes

Act II: Part Two: 25 minutes

Act III: 27 minutes

The Answer Keys are on pages 17 and 18.

ACT I
Pre-view

Time: 16 minutes

Background

In Western/Christian beliefs, angels have many duties. First of all, they are used as messengers from God. Also, they are to protect people from danger. Finally, they are to take a person to Heaven after they die. Some people believe that angels look at humans with envy because of all the things humans can experience but angels can't.

In *City of Angels*, the angel Seth studies humans and often thinks of how it would feel to be human.

Vocabulary

The following vocabulary includes words (and expressions) that you will hear in Act I of the film. Some words include examples of how they were used in the film.

disoriented: confused, not aware of what is happening

For example:

Doctor: "Has she been disoriented or confused?"

Mother: "She said she saw a man in her room."

pajamas: clothes used for sleeping in

touch: feel something with the hand or skin

preceding: come or go before another

For example:

Air traffic controller: "Federal 595, slow down to match preceding aircraft."

'out of it': too sleepy, disoriented

For example:

Doctor: "He's pretty out of it."

'hit it': do it, begin, start something

'It was textbook': standard, routine, easy to do

Questions

Before watching the first 16 minutes of the film (ACT I), read the following questions. You may answer the questions while watching the film (you may pause whenever you wish) or after the film or Act is finished.

1. What is wrong with the little girl?

- a) She is sleepy.
- b) Angry at her mother.
- c) Sick.

2. The little girl asks Seth many questions. Who was the little girl worried about?

- a) Her mother.
- b) God.
- c) Seth.

3. What does Seth ask the little girl?

- a) "Are you okay?"
- b) "Are you ready to go to Heaven?"
- c) "What did you like best (about life)?"

4. Seth asks his friend Cassiel what _____ would be like.

- a) food
- b) touch
- c) pajamas

5. Why does Seth follow Dr. Rice to the stairwell (fire escape)?

- a) She is praying to Seth.
- b) Seth thinks she can see him.
- c) Seth was passing by while leaving the hospital and saw her.

6. Why did Dr. Rice go sit on the stairwell?

- a) She was so tired; that was why her patient died.
- b) She was feeling very bad because her patient died.
- c) She was scared because she saw Seth.

Keeping the above questions in mind, now watch Act I **OR** read the following pre-view material for Act II: Part One.

Appendix B

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect comments and opinions on self-access material.

After you finish watching *City of Angels/There's Something about Mary* and complete the exercises, please answer this questionnaire. There are 15 questions.

Name: _____ Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐

1. Was this the first time you have watched (name of movie)?

Yes ☐ No ☐

2. Were the instructions clear and easy to understand? If not, please state the part that you did not understand?

Clear ☐ Not clear ☐

3. Before you watched, you...

☐ read the questions in the Preview Section of the Act that you were going to watch.

☐ read the questions in every Act before you watched the movie.

☐ used another way. Please explain _____

4. Is this material too long or too short? Too many/not enough questions or vocabulary items? Or should it provide more or less detail?

5. Did the pre-view questions help you understand the movie?

6. Did you hear the vocabulary given in the pre-view sections while you were watching the movie?

7. Do you prefer the vocabulary in the Preview Section to be...?

☐ Chronological

☐ Alphabetical

8. Would you want the vocabulary in the Preview Sections to be...

☐ the same, that is, they provide vocabulary, meaning, and example of use?

☐ changed into a vocabulary exercise?

9. Should the material provide only one format of questioning, (e.g., multiple choice) or a mixture (e.g., multiple choice, filling in the blanks, or true or false?)

10. Did this material help you understand the movie quicker?

11. Would you like to use this material to help you understand the movie rather than ask your teachers or the helpers?

12. Did you pause or rewind the video tape many times?

13. Would you want to read a synopsis before you watch a movie?

☐ Yes, because _____

☐ No, because _____

14. Would you want to watch other movies by using similar material?

15. Any other comments or suggestions?

Thank you for your cooperation

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