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Media-Assisted and Content-Based Promotion of Intercultural Education in the ESL Classroom¹

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Abstract

Eastern and Atlantic Canada's growing involvement in East Asian and Southeast Asian development is increasing the need for educational institutions to promote intercultural communication and understanding among the stakeholders of tomorrow - the young people in our schools. A media-assisted and content-based lesson for secondary learners shows special promise for integrating language skills as well as relating development themes to learners' personal concerns.

At the 2nd Teachers Develop-Teachers Research Conference in Cambridge, England, January 1995, I talked about my successes in Quebec as a teacher educator in trying to complement pre-service and in-service teacher development (Sharma 1995a). This preoccupation is based on my responsibilities in the Centre for Teaching English as a Second Language, at Concordia University, in Montreal. I talked about how I combine my work as an instructor in pre-service courses in our undergraduate

programmes with being a resource person for, and a constant consultant with the teachers in our schools, mainly in the Greater Montreal area. In this paper, I will talk about one of my most recent successes in promoting this complementation.

One thing that has helped me in complementing in-service and pre-service teacher development has been my accessibility in the past twenty years to the teachers in our schools. Many of these teachers are products

¹ This is a revised version of a paper in Selected Papers Presented at CULI's Third International Conference, 27-29 November 1995, Bangkok, Thailand

of our own B.Ed. Programme. This tie and the teachers' own interest in welcoming new ideas and materials to an otherwise prescriptive, textbook-bound curriculum provide me with fertile ground for constant experimentation. It also provides me with new field-tested topics for my courses at the University, where I find it necessary to "keep up with schools" to give my students a "real-world" justification for the instruction and preparation we are promoting.

It has been no secret in the past few years that new educational technology has been an asset to any teacher trying to keep students motivated and interested in textbook topics and content that become quickly outdated. It has also been no secret that the present generation of students is a "media generation," spending most of their outside-class hours in front of a TV set or, more and more, a personal computer, than elsewhere. This reality has forced teachers to think more of bringing this technology into the classroom for instructional purposes, and it is something that has certainly been a big plus for raising motivation in the ESL classroom. One component of this technology that has come to be a normal and regular supplement to textbook-centred instruction is the videotape in the form of original or commercial broadcast recordings.

In my work with the teachers and the students in schools, I have found two assets to being a part of the "media generation." One is that even if young people are glued too much to their TV sets or computers, they are being increasingly exposed to countries and cultures other than their own, and certainly more than I had the benefit of being exposed to while I was growing up. With the use of Internet

the use of English), among young people with personal computers, the access to information and communication, sometimes of a very personal nature, is definitely challenging the role of formal instruction and the school.

The admitted inability of the textbook to keep up with the challenge posed by the "information highway" can be remedied by giving high priority to updating content through the use of media, or simply encouraging teachers and schools to move to a content-based curriculum. Christopher Candlin, General Editor of *Language Teaching Methodology Series* published by Prentice Hall gives a lot of support to this suggestion:

The increasing emphasis on content-based curricula for secondary and primary language teachers as well as for adults naturally encourages the use of video material. (Preface in Stempleski & Tomalin 1990: vii)

The use of videotapes in the ESL classroom is not new, but they have been seen and used more as a substitute for instruction than for instruction itself. Often, videotapes of movies would be the answer to keeping students "occupied and happy" on those Friday afternoons when all attempts at "serious work" were abandoned. But two things have helped teachers move in the direction of videotapes with a little more instructional purpose in mind. One is the problems faced by young people in their personal lives outside school, caused by breakdowns in the family unit and interpersonal relationships. The other is the increasingly multicultural make-up of the average classroom in our Greater Montreal

schools, where an increasing number of students are of non-European origin, and here intercultural communication and understanding has had to be added to the priorities of the school curriculum.

In a country which takes great pride in its multicultural mosaic, there has been no lack of media resources to promote intercultural awareness within Canada. But it is only recently that media, such as television, on both our national French-language and English-language networks have given the youth market top priority and exploited topics on personal growth and developing personal relationships inside and outside the classroom. Penfield (1987:10) reminds us of the richness of the topic of "The Self and Personal Relationships" for exploitation in the classroom:

This content area is high priority for certain learners such as teenagers ... documentaries can serve to introduce values clarification and cross-cultural awareness of how differently roles and relationships are defined around the world.

With Penfield's advice in mind, I had the great fortune to watch a TV programme early in 1994 on our French-language network (Radio-Quebec) called *Avoir seize ans* ("Turning Sixteen"). This 8-day programme assembled a group of Quebec francophone teenagers in a Montreal studio to watch 6 videos on the lives and aspirations of 6 teenagers from around the world: teenage mother in Jamaica, teenage boy in Niger, teenage school girl in Egypt, teenage male

soccer player in Brazil, teenage female street worker in Thailand, teenage Tibetan Buddhist monk in India. The videos were products of our Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the 16-year-olds in the Quebec group watched one of these everyday (a 1-hour programme) to provoke discussion and debate on problems faced by teenagers here in Quebec and Canada, compared to what they saw going on around the world. Six of the teenagers had been matched in terms of personal circumstances and aspirations with 6 teenagers on the videos to stimulate highly personal and interpersonal comparisons. I was overwhelmed by the programme and the rich personalized content of the discussion and debates. I was even more delighted when no more than a week later, our national English-language youth television channel (YTV) repeated the programme with a collection of English-speaking teenagers in a Toronto studio.

I informed several teachers and schools of the broadcast and offered to show them how to exploit the material used in the programme for ELT purposes. CIDA has always made its excellent resources available for educational use and I decided to exploit this opportunity to make students aware of both CIDA's work overseas as well as the problems faced by young people growing up in developing societies, and to show how many of these problems are not unique to emerging economies alone.

My own personal involvement with this work in the ASEAN area, particularly in Thailand, gave me the extra impetus to provide our young people with a balanced view of the events in an area which usually receives negative or trivial coverage by most of our

media. My experiences also have led me to believe that constructive development (whether economical, political or educational) is the result of a frank and continuing dialogue between developed and developing societies and that the developing have just as much to teach to as learn from the developed. I think that the communication technology that developed societies have transferred to developing ones make this dialogue even more imperative. Our young people are sensitive to this need, as they search for guidance in their own personal growth.

The video that I have chosen for experimentation in the schools is, not surprisingly, the CIDA (1993) video telling the story of 16-year-old Putinam, a young lady from the rural north of Thailand who comes down to Bangkok in search of employment and hopes for a better life amidst the economic boom that her country had been experiencing. The video clip is only 11-15 minutes long, telling a highly-personalized and inspiring story of how a young person is trying to "make a difference" amidst the contradictions of development. The video is shot both in Bangkok and Putinam's rural home, and while the commentary is in English, Putinam and her friends and relatives all speak in Thai with English translations provided through close captions. Quite apart from showing our students scenes of a country they only know as "exotic" or with "much prostitution and AIDS," the story is of great relevance to our students trying to "make a difference" in their own developed midst.

As an ELT tool with a universal topic, the content of the video makes exploitation for language learning quite easy, and the fact that students can watch, listen, read (the captions)

and respond by speaking and/or writing in response to the video clip makes it ideal for any lesson where objectives are to integrate all of the skills. The increasing use of close captions on TV programmes is being recognized by ELT educators as an extra boon to the use of videos in the classroom (Woods 1994).

A videotape of an actual lesson that I recorded in one of our secondary schools, using the tools I have mentioned above, was shown as a presentation at Chulalongkorn University Language Institute's 3rd International TESOL Conference (Bangkok, Nov. 27-29, 1995) (Sharma 1995b). This recording has become part of my resource library and is accessible to any ELT educators who would like to view it, with an accompanying lesson plan. I will summarize the lesson and cite some of the input from teacher and students to show how the lesson proceeded.

This lesson was taught in a Secondary 3 ESL class of 22 teenagers of mixed cultural and linguistic (but predominantly francophone) backgrounds. The teacher, an intern in the last year of our three-year pre-service B.Ed. Programme, was coming to the end of her practice-teaching internship in the Fall Session of 1994. We planned the lesson together, but she did all of the teaching during the entire 75-minute class period.

The lesson plan we prescribe in the Centre's undergraduate programme follows the PRE, WHILE, POST activity format favoured by current methodologies that promote both bottom-up and top-down approaches to second-language instruction. The PRE activity occupies the first 15-20 minutes of the sequence where the teacher informs the

students of the topic: "Making a Difference," and involves the students in a personalized sharing and discussion of problems that they are aware of or face themselves, and how they see their role in solving these problems, as citizens of a developed society. Suggestions are put in note form on the board by the teacher and the use of modals "should" and "could" are highlighted in the quest for solutions. E.g.:

Problem:

Teenage drinking and driving

Solution:

We should have students show identification cards.

The teacher joins in the personalized and provocative discussion by citing problems she experienced as a teenage herself and what she did to solve/cope with them. The discussion then shifts to problems in developing societies when students are told they will be watching a video on Putinam, a teenager in Thailand who is attempting to solve a problem. While students' awareness of Thailand seems minimal (the teacher indicates Thailand on a world map and shows them some brochures/posters), the few that are aware do not hesitate to mention that they have heard or read about prostitution, child labour abuse, and AIDS. Some students remind the class that teenage prostitution is increasing in Montreal and something has to be done here too! When queried as to the problem Putinam faces and tries to solve, the response is quick: "Child prostitution!" The class seems to be split on whether or not Putinam is successful in arriving at a solution.

The teacher moves to the WHILE activity by reminding the students they will need to verify their information and suggestions by watching the video. She tells them that the video is made by CIDA (of which nobody is aware!) and wants the students to discover what they could learn from Putinam's story and what they could apply to their own problems and solutions. For comprehension purposes, the teacher puts the following questions on the board to remind students of the information she wants them to listen for, or read about in the close captions:

1. What problems are children in Bangkok facing in the street?
2. What is Putinam doing to help them?
3. Is she succeeding or not?

After making sure the students understand what is expected of them and advising them to take notes if necessary, the video is turned on and played with the occasional pause to clarify vocabulary and give students time to read and digest the close captions. The WHILE activity, which lasts about 20-25 minutes, ends with an all-class check of the responses to the three comprehension questions. The students give these orally and the teacher asks for cues and clues that the students have used (both visual and audio) to justify their answers. The class response reflects both the gaining and verification of information, as well as a keen and warm reception to the inspirational lesson provided by Putinam. A quick check of students' written responses to the questions posed by the teacher gives some indication that comprehension has proceeded smoothly:

1. Prostitution
 - exploitation of the children
2. - second home
 - lend money without interest
3. Yes, she started a COOP.

I have often told my students that the real value of any lesson is not so much the actual language or language skills it teaches you, but how that language or those language skills empower you for both personal and interpersonal development. The POST activity is very much an evaluation or evidence of this empowering process. It should show not so much what amount of language has been mastered as to what real-world purpose this language can be effectively applied. One of our ESL students' major complaints is their inability to see this expected relationship between what they are taught and what they are to learn.

We, therefore, leave a considerable amount of time and energy (usually 20-25 minutes) in this 75-minute period to the last or POST activity. The students are now asked to project the new information and inspiration gained through speaking, listening and reading in the PRE and WHILE activities to their own personal lives and aspirations.

What have they drawn from Putnam's experience and how can her model be used to "make a difference" in the society in which they live? In essence, what can the developing world teach the developed world? The teacher stimulates a brainstorming activity with these questions, then asks students to get together in groups of 2-4 (respecting also those who wish to work individually) to interact on a problem of their own choosing and arriving at a solution to the problem. The students are asked to choose a writer in the group who will write

down both the agreed-upon problem(s) as well as the solution(s), the group is asked to cooperate in the editing of the written notes, and the group is asked to choose a spokesperson to present these notes orally for an all-class wrap-up at the end of 15 minutes.

While the students are interacting, the teacher circulates around the class to monitor progress, helping where needed, correcting for fluency, and paying particular attention to those individuals who have chosen to work alone. With these individuals, the teacher provides the opportunity for interaction by engaging herself as an interlocutor/participant. The students are reminded that the notes have to be written clearly, and edited as much as possible for collection and evaluation by the teacher at the end of the period.

The results of the POST activity provide convincing evidence of the effectiveness of the topic, the tools, and the procedures of this lesson. I will quote a few excerpts from the written work presented by the groups and collected by the teacher. I have not made any corrections of the language used, but the reader will notice that the learners are prone to using transfer strategies from L1 (French); where this may prove a problem to the non French-speaking reader, I have indicated the English equivalents in parentheses:

Group I (3 students)

PROBLEM: Poor children

SOLUTIONS: The gouvernement should build orphanat (orphanages) for the children that don't have no parent. And should help the people that have financial problem by welfare. The police have to go on the street

to get the prostitute that is under 18. The syndicat (union) have to demand high salary. And this country may need help of O.N.U. (United Nations).

Group II (2 students)

PROBLEM: Drinking and Driving!

A lot of teens drink and drive at the same time. Most people don't see the problem but its still there. I'm scared that it will happen to one of my friends. If you drink and drive you don't have the same reaction time so people get hurt.

SOLUTION: They should do more Ids (identification cards)

Group III (2 students)

PROBLEM: The Homeless

They have no money, no stable home, no food. They take drug and alcool.

SOLUTIONS: We could give old clothes, food, donation. Volunteer to help out to feed them, help them if they have mental problem. Most of the people have a bad opinion about homeless people. But in general they're nice people, just that they don't have any money.

One particularly eloquent student, working alone, wrote a very moving piece which I will quote at length:

I see a problem that is not very present within the teenager but do hurt a lot. I think that my problem is much more inside ourself but affect a lot of choices in our life. What can emotions do when they are kept inside, when they are ignored? You can feel a sensation

throughout your stomach of emptiness. You don't know how to face it but it scares you. That is a big problem, keeping our emotions inside.

Today, most of our parents learned from our grandparents how to be quiet. Today we learn what our parents taught us, and what they mostly remember is being told what to do. They try to make us realize things that they know due to their experience, but it won't work because we didn't learned it yet. We express that pression (pressure) from the parents by many ways, such as creating a psychological barrier between them and us.

To solve this problem, we must make choices. And to make these choices, you must retrace your path since your childhood. Once there you can find the real nature of your spirits, the immortal roots. If you want to change them, you'll have a hard time to confront yourself.

If these notes and letters do not show the inspiration of Putnam on the teenagers of this class, I do not know what does. The debates I heard around the class, as I videotaped the lesson, were everything from the mundane to the philosophical and sophisticated. It was also an eye-opener for the teacher and me to learn about the problems outside the classroom that our students face and what a high level of involvement and caring our students seem to share in attempting

to cope with these problems. The cooperating or regular teacher of this class, who saw the videotaped recording of the lesson later, was amazed at the high level of motivation and interest generated by the topic and the CIDA video. We were all touched by the individual letter I have quoted above, and the regular teacher tells me this is the first time that this student has ever written so much in English!

The Putnam videotape has now been borrowed by teachers in about 20 of our Greater Montreal schools and by a few teachers in Thailand, Japan, and Singapore for use in the ESL classrooms. I have likewise shared the use of the other 5 CIDA videotapes shown in the original TV programme with teachers at both the secondary and adult levels of ELT in our schools. In addition to the videos, I have made teachers aware of two journals for young people on development themes, published 3 times in the school year (*Somewhere Today* and *Under the Same Sun*). Issued by the Minister of Supply and Services, Canada, with the assistance of CIDA, these journals are available free of charge to Canadian schools and through the Canadian Institute of Education offices overseas.

Development themes for intercultural education will probably be even more exploited by teachers in Eastern and Atlantic Canada as the multicultural Canadian mosaic spreads across and into our classrooms.

This growing interest, hopefully, has been given an extra boost these past few years by an unprecedented visits of Canadian and provincial trade delegations to the Asia-Pacific Rim area. The first of their visits in 1994 was preceded by the timely creation of a new federal government position of Secretary of State for Asia Pacific, which shows that Canada's stakes are anything but low or short-term. I can wholeheartedly support the words of the new Secretary of State for Asia Pacific Raymond Chan, who like myself recognizes the constructive role Canadians of Asian origin can play in stimulating this dialogue between teachers as learners and learners as teachers.

I definitely see myself as a bridge...I undertake this role not only when I'm outside Canada, but also when I'm at home.

(*Rapport Quarterly* 1994:3)

The Author

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