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Analysis of the Usefulness of Television in Teaching English

In an interview discussing the creative process behind creating, writing, and directing her hit show, Gilmore Girls, Amy-Sherman Palladino stated that television writers have more say in the construction of the actual story of the episode, rather than building the specific dialogue. "We've broken those stories down, so we know every little in and out before the dialogue is actually put on it," Palladino says, solidifying that multiple versions of dialogue can achieve the same story construction of an episode (Sherman-Palladino). In a show like Gilmore Girls, she continued, the dialogue is carefully written to maintain consistency of voice for each of the characters and consistency of tone throughout the show as a whole. "It's really about people talking to each other and the way they talk to each other, which is very specific. It's a little bit more work," Palladino said.

The one thing Palladino might not have considered, though, while she carefully crafted the dialogue for Gilmore Girls, is how the show could be used to teach English students more than just how to form witty arguments- (one of the show's specialties)- but also basic vocabulary and grammar skills. This paper will walk through several studies comparing the effectiveness of different television show genres that attempt to imitate everyday, unscripted language, and other studies that have examined the content of television shows and movies to see if the language in

them can be used to teach English. Their results will determine how much of an impact television has in shaping the way English is taught and learned.

Many people reference television as a template for everyday dialogue, including educators teaching ESL (English as a second language) students new vocabulary, parents exposing young children to enriching multimodal learning environments, and teens watching television to learn how to form inside jokes, absorb popular culture, and pick up on curse words (which, if we're being honest, happens way before they qualify as teens.) Much research has been done in the last decade to study whether television provides a sufficient way to learn grammar structures and vocabulary, and whether the dialogue depicted on television accurately reflects common uses of language in real life.

Teachers are interested in using television that models realistic conversations because students learning English, especially as a second language, need exposure to spoken conversation in order to learn the way English is actually spoken, not just the ways it is written and read. The first major concern of recent research has been whether television dialogue provides a believable example of standard spoken English. There, of course, are many differences between scripted and spoken English: television dialogue is written by intelligent, perceptive and witty writers and edited down to be highly concise. On top of that, visual cues on television help much of the understanding that might be overlooked in everyday conversation. On television, cameras zoom in on actors' hand gestures are zoomed in on so they are never missed, and the implications of their speech and body language is never misunderstood unless it specifically benefits the plot for that to happen. While this is unnatural, as explained in Goffman's framing theory, (everyday misunderstandings in real life happen frequently and unfortunately, don't often contribute to any

kind of ironic overarching theme, like they would in a carefully planned television show), it meets students halfway and aids them in understanding as they watch.

Despite the artifice of scripted speech, the goal of television dialogue (in relatable genres) is to meant to mirror real life situations. Because television is crafted in its entirety to push forward understanding, the camera angles, mood music, and editing all work together to help viewers understand what the dialogue means, which ends up being extremely helpful for students trying to understand what is happening.

A few studies have successfully drawn major similarities between television dialogue and real life conversation."Fictional television dialogue "is a virtually unexplored research area" and fictional TV series offer a rich repository for (corpus) linguistic analysis… television series are a prime example of modern storytelling, skilfully combine various semiotic modes (dialogue, acting performance, filmic editing…), and are increasingly of high quality (Bednarek 73).

Monika Bednarek created a study specifically to determine how similar patterns of language are in television as compared to spoken, unscripted language. The goal was to discover systematically how commonly used phrases in Gilmore Girls function to create a 'dramedy,' how it defined the genre, and how realistic those speech patterns actually are based on comparisons to other television shows and unscripted spoken English.

This study was a content analysis (specifically, a frequency analysis) of different kinds of recorded conversations. The Gilmore Girls portion analyzed fan transcripts of 153 episodes of the show. By using fan transcripts, the study got a more accurate record of pauses, hesitations, contractions, and inflection that computer subtitles can't catch.

Those scripts were compared to records of conversations from unscripted spoken English, gathered from 24 phone conversations, 95 interviews, and 50 transcripts of academic spoken English. The author also compared Gilmore Girls transcripts to written English samples and transcripts to "50 episodes (five each) from ten series representing different genres such as crime, mystery, medical drama, comedy and drama (Bednarek 58).

The study found that, out of all eleven total television shows studied, the language used in Gilmore Girls is more emotional, less narrative, and less vague than unscripted spoken English and other television shows. However, its patterns are the *most* similar out of all the television shows studied to unscripted spoken English. This is largely due to the conventions of the 'dramedy'genre that Gilmore Girls belongs to. Both Bednarek's study and a similarly extensive content analysis by Stuart Webb found that the 'dramedy' often features common types of relatable conversations, unlike medical shows, which feature unusual amounts of medical jargon, or crime dramas that feature exaggerated syntax structures to create intensity (Webb 357).

Gilmore Girls was not only the *most* similar to unscripted spoken English out of all the television shows used, but also "reasonably close to American spoken English." This was because most of the largest differences were due to the diction specifically used in the show (referring to people and places that don't exist outside the fictional world) and not the specific conversational structures, which were remarkably similar to spoken English (Bednarek 72).

Further research has continued to find that television created in this situation comedy/realistic drama genre is the most similar to everyday dialogue. Gay N. Washburn studied the situation comedy as a genre, and actually found the dialogue to be an ideal model for teaching English. "We can hear the hesitation or warmth in someone's voice and the slowing or

quickening of speech, and we can see the accompanying smile or frown; all of these support comprehension and interpretation" (Washburn 22). Sitcoms, as a genre, offer "models that are rich, varied, and contextualized… some speech routines may be expedited [television characters seem to have much more eventful lives than the rest of us] but most reflect normal uses" (Washburn 22).

When teaching English, students have to not only learn vocabulary and grammar, but also how to use language appropriately in conversation. Students are often encouraged to immerse themselves in the culture of the language that they are learning to help them understand aspects of a language that are difficult to experience in a classroom, such as slang, the way timing creates jokes and influences meaning, and the way accents form dialects. Natural conversation is otherwise difficult to model in a classroom, but television creates authentic uses of English that can be easily shown in a classroom setting.

Additionally, it was found to be beneficial that sitcoms are often exaggerated in a way that breaks the norms of common conventions of speaking. This helps define the boundaries by pointing out where characters go wrong. These violations are always marked by laughter from the audience or in a soundtrack, helping language learners recognize limits of language (Washburn 23). "Sitcoms can provide a useful source of input because of the naturalness of the language, the appropriateness and inappropriateness modeled, the nonverbal verbal commentary on the behavior of others, and the clear marking of violations through the studio audience laughter. The suppliance of violations may also help clarify the boundaries" (Washburn 26).

In addition to finding the usefulness of the specific genre of television, Webb's study also discerned that significant learning can result from viewing this kind of television. "Research

suggests that watching television is at least as effective at promoting vocabulary knowledge as learning solely through written input" (Webb 355). Especially noting the "fact that people spend more time watching television than reading," a minimal amount of time spent watching television (an hour a day for a month, for example), a significant improvement can be made to vocabulary as a result (Webb 356). Knowing that television provides an enjoyable alternative for reading, and also knowing that ordinary television is not only rich with accurate depictions of real conversation and *also* educational grammar and vocabulary content has lead many teachers to use television as a part of their English curriculums.

Some were worried that television, as a medium, would be distracting or ineffective educationally. However, Mayer's Multimedia Learning Theory, which claims that meaningful learning comes from multimedia learning environments, proved the opposite. (Dikilitas 168). This theory determined that active learning environments combine a collaboration of visual/auditory/pictorial processing, which means television (combining visual and auditory modes) makes it a highly efficient way to learn (Dikilitas 171). This conclusion was also reached in a separate study of the usefulness of television in language learning, which found that the combination of video and audio improves comprehension more easily than primarily aural learning (Webb 355).

A study by Kenan Dikilitas and Abdullah Duvenci was done to determine how watching and hearing television dialogue vs reading and hearing television dialogue helped the participants to discuss the scene. The results showed that participants who were able to watch and hear the material "did not need to visualize the content," which helped them to remember what they saw, sending more data to their brain to be used for processing, and lead to a more

fluent and more quickly spoken response in a shorter amount of time than the group who only heard and read (Dikilitas 171).

In response to this research, teachers of ESL are using television to teach conversation skills their students. More research has been done to determine how well students are absorbing vocabulary and grammar and how well it is improving their understanding of English as a result of using television as a model for language.

A study by Michael P. H. Rodgers and Stuart Webb investigated the potential for vocabulary learning as a result of viewing one season of a television show. Their results indicated that there is potential for "significant incidental vocabulary learning as a result of watching complete seasons of television programs in terms of both breadth (how many words are known) and depth (how well words are known) of vocabulary knowledge" (Rodgers and Webb "Narrow Viewing" 710). They also found that significant vocabulary can be learned through watching unrelated television programs if they are watched often (710). Their study found that vocabulary learned from watching a wide variety of things is similar to vocabulary learned through reading a wide variety of things. Even if the content doesn't connect and specific, technical vocabulary isn't being repeated, lower-level vocabulary tends to occur in high-frequency across a variety of genres. This means learning lower-level, often-occurring vocabulary through television is comparable to reading for comprehension in a foreign language. Rodgers and Webb encouraged teachers to use independent television viewing as a significant way to teach vocabulary because students are often more interested in it than they would be to read.

In a separate study, Rodgers and Webb studied how demanding the vocabulary is in television programs, hoping to see if it would be possible to use television in an ESL context. They found that for learners who know the most frequent 3,000 words, television offers an opportunity for significant vocabulary gains (Webb et al "Vocabulary Demands" 355). Noting that children are exposed to television as they learn their native language, which they learn from, television assists their learning at later stages of learning as well (Webb et al 356). This understanding makes it possible to use television to assist students at any point in their work towards learning English.

In summary, the consensus of recent research has shown that television provides quality models for conversation that would be useful for students learning English to be exposed to, that television itself is a medium that is engaging and, often, optimal for learning, and that significant amounts of vocabulary and grammar skills can be gained from watching minimal amounts of television. Television can be used in the classroom or as an independent form of study, with efficient and sufficient educational results from an attentive student.

Television, more than any other medium, influences deep understanding of the way a language functions in a way that reading in that language cannot. Specifically curated scenes, plots, and episodes work together to present a story that can be used to not only promote understanding of vocabulary and grammar, but also the way the language is used and functions socially among the characters, and, consequently, in real life.

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