

The pedagogical values of cartoons

Taher Bahrani* Rahmatollah Soltani

Department of English, Mahshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mahshahr, Iran

* E-mail of the corresponding author: taherbahrani@yahoo.com

Abstract

Cartoons as a source of authentic audiovisual language input have proved to be effective in increasing language learners' motivation. In fact, the psychological aspects of utilizing cartoons as teaching materials have been emphasized by many researchers. In the same line, the present paper aims at further highlighting the pedagogical value of cartoons particularly for low level language learners. As a matter of fact, cartoons are good sources of modified language input which although may require less cognitive processing for comprehension, they may include new aspects of the language for low level language learners who have not acquired them yet.

Key words: Cartoons, Authentic language input, Pedagogical value

1. Introduction

Today, our society and the world in general are becoming more audiovisual but many of the institutions have not kept up with its progress (Hartmann, 1996). It is often heard that language learners complaining about boring conversation courses and activities in many language classes. In fact, very often the success or failure of a program, in this case language learning, depends on the classroom atmosphere and the pedagogical materials presented to the students. In this relation, various audiovisual programs have the potential to be utilized as sources of authentic language input to provide the necessary language input for language learning. In relation to the concept of authentic language input, Nunan (1999) and Gilmore (2007) underscored the point that authentic language materials are spoken or written language materials which are not initially produced for the language teaching. Nunan (1999) further highlighted that authentic language input can be extracted from number of sources including TV broadcasts such as news, movies, songs, cartoons, recorded conversations, meetings, and newspapers.

In view of the above, cartoons as pedagogically valuable sources of language input can be used at any time during the teaching or training as long as they are relevant to the point or have been designed with a specific purpose. Cartoons can be used as a useful means of improving the learning atmosphere. However, cartoons should not be used simply to fill in time when the facilitator does not have anything else to present. As a matter of fact, using cartoons would certainly break the monotony (Rae, 2000) of reading text after text in the schoolbooks. For example, very often a picture speaks louder than words and has more impact than just reading the text. The same scene that the cartoon depicts would undoubtedly take longer to describe using the written word and the scope for comprehension would be restricted. It is also believed that the usage of cartoons can reduce boredom and decrease academic stress, anxiety and disruptive behavior.

The pedagogical value of cartoons as an authentic source of language input has been considered by some studies. In an anecdotal study conducted by Clark (2000), the point was emphasized that cartoons can keep the attention of the learners and present information in a stress-free atmosphere. Further, cartoons have the potential to promote thinking processes and discussion skills (Clark, 2000). Another study was conducted by Doing (2002) focusing on the effect of cartoons on language learning. The study showed that the language learners who had exposure to cartoons could produce oral answers that were interesting in diverse discussions held in the classes. Additionally, the discussions were rich and the students had high confidence. It seems that the high confidence that the language learners acquire is due to exposure to cartoons which create low affective filter atmosphere for learning. In line with Schoppe (2001) who indicated that songs have the pedagogical potential to create low affective filter atmosphere for language learning, cartoons can also create the same situation.

In the same line, a study was carried out by Rule and Ague (2005) which provided evidence of the language learners' preferences to utilize cartoons in language learning. Similar to songs, cartoons are preferred because they create low affective filter atmosphere which causes high degree of motivation. Accordingly, the high confidence and motivation achieved through exposure to cartoons is claimed to

enhance the memory of the language learners when they try to make connection between the new materials and the prior knowledge through analogy in a comfortable atmosphere.

2. Why cartoons?

Almost any cartoons can be used as an introduction to a lesson or a course. The two main purposes of using introductions to lessons are firstly, to allow the learners to introduce themselves to each other, and secondly, to lead into the topic matter. Learners often find that the topic matter is made clearer by the use of appropriate introduction.

Cartoons are generally fun for everyone to utilize and tend to be more experiential in their application. It is to give a lesson more impact. They can be utilized to help learners perceive familiar situations or objects in a different way. According to Kroehnert (1999), the end result with most cartoons exercises is that learners are made aware of their need to use lateral thinking, to look at things in different ways, and to try to break down any preconceived stereotypes that they may have.

Visual information in the form of cartoons is usually processed by the right brain which is the holistic, creative, artistic side. On the other hand, the spoken word engages the left side of the listeners' brain. In contrast, the left brain is analytical, recognizes and interprets words, performs calculations and so on. No matter how interesting and persuasive, for example, a lecture is, after awhile, the learners will feel the dullness of the same manner of instruction. However, by using cartoons, we appeal to the visual, as well as the auditory, sense giving the additional effectiveness through variety and creativity. At the end of any learning experience, experienced teachers would usually debrief the learners on the lesson for the day or the session. By showing the appropriate cartoon(s), the teacher would be able to encapsulate important teaching points without having to say or repeat too many words.

3. Uses of cartoons

Experience demonstrated that cartoons have a number of uses. Cartoons can be used individually, in pairs, small groups and even in large lecture classes. Cartoons are a wonderfully versatile medium in enhancing teaching and training.

Visually, the impact of cartoons is immediate and language learners, irrespective of age or background, are able to respond in some ways to the educational point being made. With the combination of words and pictures, it can attract attention and interest. Other benefits include the promotion of understanding, motivation towards learning, improved attitudes, productivity and creativity.

Other benefits include the enhanced relationship between teacher and students as cartoons can create a light, playful mood. However, those who associate learning only with more formal classroom activities, may see cartoons as a waste of time and do not take their valuable contributions seriously.

Every learner can respond instantly to cartoons according to his/her personal interpretation. Cartoons can be used as an alternative tool for developing cognitive development. In interacting with the cartoons stimuli, they are refining their own learning and understanding while at the same time be encouraged to develop critical higher order cognitive skills.

Concept cartoons as suggested by Keogh and Naylor (1996) believed that this approach has a direct and immediate impact in the classroom. They seemed to promote a purposeful approach to practical work. It has been found that concept cartoons lead to a number of learning developments such as a shift from negatively-worded to positively-worded statements, a shift from statements to questions and a shift from single alternatives to multiple alternatives. Concept cartoons are intended as a starting point to stimulate discussion and for eliciting ideas from the learners. To illustrate this point, students can be provided with an illustration and questions that require them to consider their thoughts, feeling and form opinions about the situation portrayed.

Cartoons are commonly used in language teaching. However, the use of cartoons has also been found to offer an effective means to develop particular skills such as social skills. Sociologically, cartoons are a powerful means of providing social and political comment (Ziegler, 1998) because so often they reveal the contrast between perception and reality (Witkin, 1999). By nature, cartoons usually exaggerate a particular aspect or situation that can help focus on a suitable teaching/learning point. As they are seen as a neutral resource, students are able to respond, joke about possible interpretations, and react to the exaggerations without being offended. Cartoons can be used with students to objectively analyze everyday social behaviour and a stimulus to reflection on attitudes.

Without a doubt, the use of cartoons would certainly promote a high level of involvement among learners who are normally reluctant to get involved in discussion. Cartoons would enable students who do not normally converse much in English to articulate their ideas more readily. Woolnough (1994)

notes that if students are motivated and if they are given the freedom and the opportunity, they will find ways of learning. If they are not, they will not bother.

Cartoons can be replicated with a variety of groups in many teaching situations. These include primary and secondary schools, students with special educational needs, students learning English as a second language, undergraduate and postgraduate students, primary and secondary school teachers and parents. Although the clarity of some of the cartoons needs to be modified or adapted to the various groups, we generally find them remarkably easy to use and effective in their outcome.

4. Preparation of cartoons for teaching and training

Selection of the method of training or teaching often comes after the setting of the learning objectives. The method selected should respond to the learners' needs, not the teacher or the facilitators. The same procedure applies to the selection of cartoons. It is through the careful selection and use of appropriate and relevant cartoons that an element of humor can be introduced, where appropriate, without detracting from the intention of the teaching situation. When we have decided on the particular cartoon to be used, it is essential to practice using it at least once with a group of learners. This will help us find out if the cartoon selected is going to work and in the expected way with the expected results. The cartoons selected must be evaluated for their worth and effectiveness. If they do not produce the desired effect, then it might need to be scrapped or modified. In the same line, the following tips may help the practitioners to better utilize cartoons in their conversation classes:

- Use cartoons that are interesting to the students
- Include various segments of different cartoons to keep the variety
- Let the students view a short segment of 2-3 minutes first for understanding the general topic
- Let the students share what they understand from their viewing
- Ask the students to watch a selected segments before the class meets
- Use cartoons that include modified language input for young children

5. Conclusion

Today, having access to various audiovisual programs such as cartoons is very easy. As teachers, we are constantly looking for new ways of teaching to enable learners to be actively involved in their own learning particularly in developing their general language proficiency. In this respect, audiovisual programs such as cartoons can make a valuable contribution if they the doors of the conversation classes are opened to them. This is because cartoons provide visual impact, which is immediate. Because of the type of modified language input which is embedded in cartoons, irrespective of the learners' proficiency level particularly low level language learners, they can respond instantly to what is being shown.

In the same line, many researchers underscore the psychological aspects of utilizing cartoons in language learning. Generally, feedback from students on the use of cartoons as a teaching strategy has been consistently favorable. However, like any teaching strategy, one has to be careful not to overuse cartoons or their effect will be diminished if not lost. In fact, it is suggested that other types of audiovisual programs are also used along with cartoons. As a matter of fact, teachers need to keep a balance with the type of program and the content that we would like our students to learn.

References

- Clark, C. (2000). Innovative strategy: Concept cartoons. *Instructional and learning strategies*, 12: 34-45.
- Doring, A. (2002). *Effective Teaching and Learning at University: The Use of Cartoons as a Teaching and Learning Strategy*. Australian Catholic University.
- Gilmore, A. (2007). Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning. *Lang. Teach.* 40: 97-118.
- Hartmann, T. (1996). Beyond ADD: Hunting for reasons in the past and present. In Freed, J. & Parson, L. (1997). *Right-brained Child in a Left-brained World: Unlocking the Potential of Your ADD child*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Keogh, B., & Naylor, S. (1996). *Teaching and Learning in Science: A New Perspective*. Paper presented at the BERA Conference, Lancaster, September 1996.
- Kroehnert, G.. (1999). *101 Training Games*. Sydney: McGraw-Hill Company.
- Lochrie, K. (1992). *Using Cartoons as an Effective Learning and Teaching Strategy*.
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Rae, L. (2000). *Effective Planning in Training and Development*. London: Kogan Page.

- Rule, A. C., & Auge, J. (2005). Using humorous cartoons to teach mineral and rock concepts in sixth grade science class. *Journal of geosciences education*, 53(3): 548-558.
- Schoepp, K. (2001). Reasons for using songs in EFL/ESL classrooms. *The internet TEFL Journal*, 7(2). Available at: <http://iTEFLj.org/articles/Schoepp-Songs.html>. Accessed: February 3, 2006.
- Watterson, B. (1995). *The Calvin and Hobbes: Tenth Anniversary Book*. London: Warner Books.
- Witkin, S. (1999). Taking Humour Seriously. *Social Work*, 44 (2): 101-104.
- Woolnough, B. (1994). *Effective Science Teaching*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Ziegler, J. (1998). Use of Humour in Medical Teaching. *Medical Teacher*, 20 (4): 341-348.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:**

<http://www.iiste.org/Journals/>

The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a fast manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

