

TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION THROUGH VIDEO IN FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE SPANISH

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Video has become a very important tool in the language classroom. Because of the drop in cost of video equipment, many schools can now purchase a VCR and a monitor, the basic equipment needed to put together a "video classroom." Teachers can incorporate movies and prepackaged video material into their classes as a means of building comprehension skills, as an enhancer of cultural awareness, or simply as a way to activate students' interest. Television is the major source of information and entertainment in the lives of many of our students, and far more hours are spent watching television than most other activities. The teacher who uses video in the classroom is able to capitalize on this attraction to the visual image.

The chief obstacle that faces teachers who want to take advantage of this powerful means of instruction is finding appropriate materials. Particularly at the beginning levels of language instruction, the grammar or the vocabulary may not correspond to what students are learning at the moment. When dealing with print materials, teachers can adapt the textbook to their personal style, but this is not possible with most video material. We can tinker with the previewing and post-viewing activities and exercises, but the tape itself is almost impossible to modify unless we have at our disposal sophisticated and expensive equipment that can accomplish such feats as slowing down the playback speed or

substituting a simpler sound track. Furthermore, available prepackaged materials can be costly, especially for courses with large enrollments.

The first-semester Spanish course at Middlebury College consists of six hours, as follows: 1) three hours of class with the instructor, in which grammar and vocabulary are introduced and practiced in communicative activities; 2) two hours of drill with undergraduate teaching assistants using a modified Dartmouth method, in which grammar and vocabulary are practiced via mechanical drills; and 3) one hour of listening comprehension through video. Students are also responsible for completing each chapter of the workbook and the laboratory tape program for our text, *Puntos de partida* (Second Edition, Random House, 1985)¹. The hour devoted to listening comprehension was a new addition to the program. Faced with the problems described above, as well as insufficient time to do an exhaustive search of the published video materials², we decided that, for the first semester, we would produce our own.

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Making a video is relatively easy nowadays. The camera is light and uncomplicated and can be rented from many video stores if no camcorder is available from the campus audiovisual center or language lab. For our project, we hired a student to do the taping, since little special expertise was required and since what we were planning was technically very straightforward. The camera was set up on a tripod and all the operator had to do was to press the record button and follow the actors around with a swivel movement.

We applied to video the same techniques we use to adapt our print material for our proficiency-oriented class. Many newer textbooks have a thematic approach, that is, the different chapters develop a theme or context such as family, school, restaurants, or travel. Most new vocabulary is carefully introduced at the beginning of the chapter, before any grammar is presented. In the grammar sections proper, the exercises incorporate the vocabulary and try to integrate the themes that the chapter emphasizes. At the end come other exercises and activities that allow students to practice what they have learned in a more creative fashion. If the graduated exercises in the preliminary and grammar sections have done their job well, then the students should be ready here to be more playful with the language, to be at ease with what they have learned.

The strength of this organizational approach is that students start with the relatively simple aspects of the context (the vocabulary), then move to the more complex (grammar explanations and exercises). The weakness is that the integration of theme with linguistic functions in creative and communicative activities generally is reserved for the end of the chapter. An instructor who has fallen behind in the syllabus might be tempted to treat these activities lightly or drop them from the program entirely. In addition, their location at the end of the chapter sends the subconscious message to students that these activities are less important than the central focus of the chapter, which remains grammar

and, to a lesser degree, vocabulary.

The next step was to decide what to tape, and how to incorporate the resulting material into the general scheme for the course. We decided to produce videos that would demonstrate to students a possible communicative purpose for the material of the next lesson. Students saw a skit that featured some of the vocabulary and grammar of the upcoming week. Each skit was designed to be as close to real life as possible—getting directions to a building on campus, a job interview, a student planning course schedule with his faculty adviser, etc. By demonstrating upcoming structures through the video, we could quickly present the material for general comprehension before the students were expected to deal with the content more thoroughly in an analytical and productive mode. Although we made no study of the effect of this video “pre-view” of upcoming material, we believe that presenting the material first for reception facilitated students’ overall understanding and productive control.

Our next important decision was to avoid scripting the dialogue. We planned out only the context, the communicative task that was to be carried out, and the rudiments of the plot line. The principal actors were the two instructors of the course, with occasional “guest appearances” by another faculty member and a student who was a native speaker. The actors created the dialogue during the taping, using all the vocabulary and the grammatical structures from the textbook that would naturally come to their minds as they performed. The advantage of this improvisational approach is that the language sounds more natural. We soon learned that the students liked the spontaneity of the situations, which somewhat made up for the obviously amateurish quality of the acting.

Every taping session yielded three segments. Two of the segments were “free-standing,” that is, the plot line was self-contained, although they followed the function/vocabulary outlines for that particular week. As we progressed into the semester, we began to

adapt to students' likes and dislikes. Thus, our third segment evolved slowly into a soap opera about a husband and wife and their marital problems. Appendix A shows how a typical taping session corresponded to a chapter of our textbook. The right hand column for Week Nine, for example, shows the grammatical content for that week. Our segments dealt with giving directions, a new episode of the soap opera, and a case of lost luggage at the Rio de Janeiro airport. Why Rio de Janeiro? Because in a previous segment on travel, we had used an advertisement for a travel agency from a Spanish newspaper that featured Brazil as a destination. The customer in that particular segment had decided, after some discussion with the travel agent, to spend his vacation in Brazil. It then became logical to have him lose his luggage at the Rio de Janeiro airport in a segment the following week.

After taping we prepared the pre-viewing and comprehension material based on the content of the video. If by chance one of the actors had uttered an expression or a grammar structure that might impede the comprehension of the whole, the pre-viewing material included an explanation to prepare the students for it. At every step we tried to incorporate material available in the students' texts, particularly material from those sections of the chapters that were usually not covered in class because of lack of time. For Week Nine, we based one of the comprehension exercises on a lost-luggage report form from Iberia Airlines that was in fact the inspiration of one taping segment; we used its vocabulary, grammar structure, even its imbedded cultural content. The students could then watch the video segment and fill out the form.

By the end of the first semester, the students' comprehension had improved so much that they understood most of the content of the videos, even without the aid of the pre-viewing and comprehension exercises. We decided to incorporate authentic material from Spanish-language television in the second semester. The material we chose (see Appendix B) included the following:

- news broadcasts, both current news ("The Crisis in Panama," "Financing the Contras") and human interest stories ("Special Olympics");
- investigative reporting programs in the series "América," which has a format much like that of "West 57th Street" or "Sixty Minutes";
- television commercials, both for unfamiliar products on Spanish TV and for familiar products on US TV;
- popular songs; and
- an episode of "Moonlighting," dubbed into Spanish for Spanish television.

The procedure followed for working with students on video segments was adapted from June Phillips' five-stage method for teaching reading comprehension (Phillips, 1). The task was to make authentic material comprehensible for students who had studied Spanish for only five months. The five-stage method, which we reduced to four, is as follows:

1. **Pre-listening activities.** These consisted of two components: 1) prediction, in which students tried to anticipate what they would see and hear; and 2) learning key vocabulary items that they would need.

The pre-listening exercises assumed that students could predict much of the content of the video segment on the basis of their general knowledge about the world and their long experience as television viewers. The instructor began the pre-listening activity by suggesting a few key ideas or questions and then had the students brainstorm relevant information. For example, in a segment on smoking that included an interview with a doctor about the rise in cancer among women, the instructor first asked: "Why is it dangerous for pregnant women to smoke?"³ As the students listed their reasons, the instructor wrote them on the board, supplying the key vocabulary as necessary. By directing the prediction activities discreetly and carefully, the instructor ensured that the main points and vocabulary that occurred in the video were all mentioned. In our opinion, this method of vocabulary presentation is superior to giving students a

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list of words to memorize ahead of time, since the pre-listening method allows them to experience the vocabulary in context; in fact, the vocabulary is supplied to them as they themselves need it to express their own thoughts.

2. **Global comprehension.** First the students watched the segment, or a portion of it if the segment was too long for them to handle comfortably. At this stage they listened to segments no more than two or three minutes in length. If the material was particularly difficult, the instructor played it twice, or played it through first with no sound, so that students could focus exclusively on the image and the meaning it conveyed. The students were then divided into groups of three. With one person serving as recording secretary, each group listed all of the facts that its members were able to understand. Those who found the language itself too hard were asked to focus on anything they could—the expression of the people, how many people were talking, where they were, what place names they heard, etc. (At first students had to be reminded frequently to pay attention to extralinguistic factors and to use them for comprehension.) Students then called out their items while the instructor wrote them on the board. The instructor added crucial material as unobtrusively as possible. Discrepancies among the group lists and between the predictions and the actual video were discussed and resolved.

The global comprehension stage produces a summary of the video segment in what Omaggio calls SAADs (Simple Active Affirmative Declarative Sentences) (Omaggio, 2, p. 130). In effect, the students have created a parallel text in their own words. Because they generated the language themselves, it was completely comprehensible to them. They were ready to move to the third stage, which Phillips calls “decoding” for reading, or comprehension of details. We broke this down into two stages: comprehension of factual details, and comprehension of linguistic details.

3. **Comprehension of details.** The whole class listened again to the videotape and completed the content comprehension exercises we had prepared. (See Appendix C for a sample comprehension activities sheet.) Standard formats were favored in these exercises: matching facts logically, yes/no questions, brief answers to questions, and “Who said it?” identifications. After working through the exercises, students were usually fairly familiar with the content of the segment. The exercises focused on listening comprehension; the reading was kept simple and the formats required little writing, so that attention would not be taken away from the process of listening.

4. **Manipulating the text for linguistic analysis.** In this stage, students moved from comprehension of the ideas to an understanding of how those ideas are expressed linguistically. A short selection of three or four sentences from the video segment was prepared as a cloze exercise. The paragraph was chosen for usefulness of vocabulary, correspondence of the structures to material currently being studied in class, and clarity of the language. Students watched the video several times to fill in the blanks; they then compared their work with a partner, analyzed each other’s approximations, and tried again. Finally, we went over the paragraph together and cleared up any remaining doubts. The instructor then presented some brief lexical and structural exercises, *e.g.*, synonyms and paraphrases for words or expressions, transformation of a passive construction into an active one, structural analysis of a particular word or construction, etc. These were intended to lead the students to make connections between what they already knew and what was new (but still comprehensible) to them.

What have been the results of this approach to the teaching of listening comprehension in the first year? First and foremost, the students’ comprehension was excellent for their level. It is, of course, impossible to say whether this perceived improvement in

comprehension over previous groups was due simply to increased time devoted to this skill, or to the method we used. But some benefits did seem to flow directly from the instructional plan: 1) an ability to listen for the main ideas without becoming distracted or overwhelmed by the speed or the onslaught of details; 2) in the first semester, familiarity with models for interaction that seemed to support both psychologically and linguistically the intensive use of paired and small-group activities in class.

The authentic material that proved most successful was familiar in format and/or content, so that students could rely on their own knowledge of the world and knowledge of television as a presenter of fact and fiction to assist them in comprehension. Segments in which the visual image supported the auditory message were most easily understood. Extended monologues or dialogues without visual back-up proved most of the time to be too difficult to comprehend. In terms of content, rock videos and other popular music performances were especially appealing, and their characteristic repetition imprinted certain words and phrases in students' minds. Current news and news feature programs allowed for instruction about contemporary culture.

In conclusion, the experiment with extensive and systematic use of video in first-year college Spanish was an unqualified success. Directions for the future include gathering of a larger repertoire of authentic material so that we can choose segments with a closer thematic connection to course content, re-filming some of our own unscripted skits "on location" with a portable camera (in the bookstore, at the library, asking directions on the street, etc.) for an appearance of greater authenticity, and experimenting with authentic material in the first semester.

NOTES

1. Since the paper was delivered, we have changed books, and now use *Entradas* (Heinle and Heinle 1989). We were able to use many of the same video segments.
2. The ACTFL SLOM (Selected Listing of Materials) Project, currently nearing completion, will facilitate such searches in the future.
3. All class discussion is conducted in Spanish. The questions are given in English here for the convenience of the readers.

REFERENCES

- Omaggio, A. C. 1986. *Teaching Languages in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Phillips, J. K. 1984. Practical Implications of Recent Research in Reading. *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (4): 285-96.

**APPENDIX A: SEMI-SCRIPTED VIDEO:
SPANISH 101, FIRST SEMESTER**

WEEK	CONTENT OF VIDEO	ACTIVITY TYPE(S)	CORRESPONDING TEXTBOOK CONTENTS IN <i>PUNTOS DE PARTIDA</i>
1	1. Greetings 2. Introductions 3. Job interview 4. Food purchase at market	Transcriptions with blanks Transcriptions with blanks Job application form with blanks a. Matching food with price b. Identifying number of items bought	Courtesy expressions: greetings, introductions Give autobiographical information Numbers Names of foods (needed for mandatory Spanish language meals)
2	1. Student meets with advisor to fill out course registration card 2. Interview with a Middlebury College student 3. Young man tries to engage young woman in conversation at party (unsuccessfully) 4. Cinderella and the Prince at the ball	a. Schedule card with blanks b. Yes/No statements Transcription with questions left blank Yes/No statements Transcription with blanks	School subjects, days of the week, time, <i>gustar</i> Ask questions <i>gustar</i> , school subjects, present tense of regular verbs Ask questions Tell time Infinitives after <i>tengo que</i> and <i>ir a</i>

3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interview for registration in a summer course 2. Bookstore inventory 3. Genealogy 	<p>Fill out form</p> <p>Fill out form</p> <p>Fill in family tree</p>	<p>Give autobiographical information</p> <p>Ask questions</p> <p>Numbers</p> <p>School vocabulary</p> <p>Colors</p> <p>Family relationships</p> <p>Hispanic surnames</p>
4	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Computer dating service interview 2. Vendor/costumer in open-air market 3. Arranging a date 	<p>Fill out form</p> <p>Summary with blanks</p> <p>Who said it?</p>	<p>Personal description</p> <p>Nationality</p> <p>Clothing</p> <p>Material (cloth, metal, etc.)</p> <p>Prices, Colors, Bargaining</p> <p>Impersonal expressions</p> <p>Idiomatic expression with <i>tener</i></p>
5	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Conversation about daily routine 2. Husband and wife arrange furniture in the living room 3. Friends discuss upcoming wedding of one of them 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Fill in schedule form b. Brief answers to questions <p>Summary with blanks</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Fill out form with information about fiancé b. Summary with blanks c. Match sentence parts; complete sentences 	<p>Present progressive tense</p> <p>Prepositions of location</p> <p>Furniture items</p> <p>Ask for/give biographical information</p> <p>Vocabulary of romance/marriage</p> <p>Present progressive tense</p>

<p>6</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Weather report 2. Failed attempt to invite a young woman on a date 3. Husband and wife talk about their marriage 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Form with blanks b. Brief answers to questions <p>Transcription with blanks</p> <p>Who said it?</p>	<p>Weather expressions Numbers Compass points Fahrenheit/Centigrade conversion Expressions of preference, acceptance, refusal Possessive adjectives Impersonal expressions Negative expressions Comparatives Negative expressions Comparatives</p>
<p>7</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Love letter 2. Husband and wife in restaurant 3. Ordering a meal 	<p>Transcription with blanks</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Who said it? b. Identify place setting items from pictures a. Who ordered what? (Check off on menu) b. True/false 	<p>Present progressive tense Pronouns as objects of prepositions Irregular verbs in present tense Restaurant vocabulary</p> <p>Menu vocabulary Order a meal</p>

8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Making arrangements at travel agency 2. Conversation between tourist and flight attendant 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Multiple choice questions b. Brief answers to questions (based on newspaper ad from travel agency) <p>True/false</p>	<p>Travel vocabulary</p> <p>Travel vocabulary Airplane vocabulary</p>
9	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Giving street directions 2. Discussion of family problems (husband/wife) 3. Lost luggage 	<p>Transcription with blanks</p> <p>Transcription with blanks</p> <p>Fill out form</p>	<p>Give directions</p> <p>Subjunctive with expressions of volition</p> <p>Description</p>

**APPENDIX B: AUTHENTIC VIDEO:
SPANISH 103, SECOND SEMESTER**

WEEK	SOURCE	VIDEO SEGMENT	ACTIVITY TYPE(S)
1	América: Univisión (US)	<p>1. <i>Viviendo en las sombras</i> (Living in the Shadows). Investigative reporting of homeless in Los Angeles</p> <p>2. Financing the Contras in Nicaragua. News report of a demonstration while Congress debated aid to the Contras</p>	<p>a. Match facts about real estate with figures mentioned</p> <p>b. Check off facts mentioned from a list</p> <p>c. Transcription with blank (3 sentences)</p> <p>d. Linguistic analysis of transcription</p> <p>Statements with Yes/No</p>
2	América: Univisión (US)	<p>1. <i>Consumiendo su vida</i> (Consuming Your Life). Investigative reporting on dangers of smoking</p> <p>a. How smoking affects women</p> <p>b. Smoking and society: interviews with smokers</p> <p>c. Legal issue</p> <p>d. How to stop smoking (tips)</p>	<p>a. Statements with Yes/No</p> <p>b. Check off facts mentioned from a list Who said it?</p> <p>Transcription with blanks (3 sentences)</p> <p>Transcription with blanks (imperatives)</p>
3	América: Univisión (US)	<p><i>Cómo encontrar el amor perfecto</i> (How to Find True Love). Valentine's Day program: Interview with a psychologist</p>	<p>a. Multiple-choice questions on main idea</p> <p>b. Transcription with blanks (3 sentences)</p> <p>c. Linguistic analysis of transcription</p> <p>d. Transcription with blanks (imperatives on tips to women for attracting a man)</p>

4	Mundo hispano: Univisión (Mex.)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Commemoración de George Washington</i> Report (voiceover with visuals) on life and accomplishments of George Washington 2. "<i>Cuando calienta el sol</i>" (popular song) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Interview with singer 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Match events with dates b. Transcription with blanks (2 sentences) c. Linguistic analysis of transcription <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Statements with Yes/No b. Transcription with blanks c. Linguistic analysis of transcription
5	América: Univisión (US)	<i>Eutanasia: El caso de Hector Rodas</i> (Euthanasia: The Case of Hector Rodas). Investigative reporting of a case of terminally ill man who won legally the right to die	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Brief answers to questions b. Transcription with blanks
6	América: Univisión (US)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Misterio sísmico</i> (Seismic Mystery). Report on earthquake by seismologists in California 2. <i>Atrévete</i> (popular song) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Complete table on location, date, strength of earthquakes b. Brief answers to questions c. Check off facts from list d. Transcription with blanks (3 sentences) <p>Transcription with blanks</p>
7	HBN	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Resolución del motín de Oakdale</i> (Resolving the Oakdale [LA] prison riot). News report, including voiceover, interviews with wives of Cuban prisoners 2. <i>Surf – el mejor detergente</i> Commercial for Surf laundry detergent. Family scene: parents and 2 children 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Statements with Yes/No b. Transcription with blanks (3 sentences) c. Linguistic analysis of transcription <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Who said it? b. Transcription with blanks (1 sentence) c. Linguistic analysis of transcription

8	News broadcast from Spain (SCOLA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Future of Torrejón. News report of a march on US military base in Torrejón, outside Madrid. Voiceover plus interview with demonstrators 2. <i>La crisis en Panamá</i>. News report of the situation in Panamá (April 1988). Voice-over plus interviews with workers 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Statements with Yes/No b. Transcription with blanks (2 sentences) c. Linguistic analysis of transcription <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Statements with Yes/No b. Transcription with blanks (2 sentences) c. Linguistic analysis of transcription
9	<p>Noticiero Univisión (US)</p> <p>Mundo hispano: Univisión (Mex.)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Special Olympics. News report on Special Olympics in Florida. Voice-over interviews with participants. 2. <i>Dos en uno</i> (popular song) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Brief answers to questions b. Transcription with blanks (3 sentences) <p>Transcription with blanks</p>
10 & 11	"Luz de luna" ("Moonlighting") dubbed for Spanish TV (Spain)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Approximately 1/4 of one episode. (It's the one where Whoopi Goldberg plays the part of a con artist.) 2. Three commercials during the <i>Luz de luna</i> episode: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Paper towels b. Olive oil c. Ford cars 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Brief answers to questions b. Transcriptions with blanks (3 sentences in week 10; 8 sentences in week 11) c. Linguistic analysis of transcription <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Brief answers to questions b. Transcription with blanks (car vocabulary)

APPENDIX C

CONSUMIENDO SU VIDA: UN REPORTAJE SOBRE EL FUMAR

I. El fumar: las estadísticas – Contesta SI o NO:

1. El Departamento de Salud declaró en 1974 que el tabaco era el mayor causante del cáncer del pulmón.
2. El porcentaje de mujeres que fuma está aumentando.
3. En 1983 el 30 por ciento de los hombres fumaban.

II. El fumar y el embarazo

Según el reportaje, las consecuencias de fumar durante el embarazo son:

- _____ el parto precoz
- _____ la muerte de la mujer durante el parto
- _____ la muerte del niño durante el parto
- _____ el aborto
- _____ un niño de menor desarrollo
- _____ un niño adicto al tabaco

III. Las razones para fumar

¿Quién da estas razones para fumar — la mujer, el joven, o el hombre rubio?

- a. Me da placer.
- b. Cuando no fumo, me pongo nervioso.
- c. Cuando era joven, fumaba para sentirme adulta.
- d. Hablando de fumar me da ganas de fumar.
- e. Lo pensé como un juego.
- f. No me importa si estoy desperdiciando unos años de mi vida.

IV. Los aspectos legales

Las palabras de la abogada Mari Carmen Aponte:

No se puede _____ fumar en lugares _____. Sí se puede regular _____ en lugares públicos. Por ejemplo, hemos visto que en unos 36 a 40 estados, has pasado _____ donde dicen que los restaurantes tienen que tener ciertas _____ designadas para gente que no _____.

Problemas relacionadas con las demandas:

1. ¿Quiénes están poniendo las demandas?

- a. Personas que sufren del cáncer del pulmón
- b. Los fabricantes de cigarrillos
- c. Unos médicos

2. ¿Tienen éxito las demandas? SI NO

3. Según la abogada Aponte, ¿qué necesita una persona que demanda para tener éxito?

- a. Sufrir del cáncer después de año de fumar
- b. Probar que cierta marca de cigarrillo causó su cáncer
- c. Tener la cooperación de sus médicos

V. Cómo dejar de fumar

1. _____ una fecha a partir de la cual no va a fumar más.
2. _____ un amarca de cigarrillos que no le guste.
3. _____ cada día menos que el día anterior.
4. No _____ los ceniceros para así ver cuánto está fumando.
5. _____ tentaciones una vez que haya dejado de fumar.
6. _____ nuevos hábitos no asociados con el fumar.

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