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“THE ELLEN DEGENERES SHOW” AS A SOURCE OF AUTHENTIC LISTENING MATERIALS FOR ESL LESSONS

Summary. *This article examines use of authentic audio materials in improving listening skills of students who learn English as a second language. As a content source fragments of American talk-show called “The Ellen DeGeneres Show” are applied. Author considers the advantages of an authentic audio material in comparison with the adapted ones. Also the article provides examples of exercises possible for applying on the lessons which include “The Ellen DeGeneres Show” videos in the plan.*

Key words: *listening, authentic materials, teaching methods, English, talk-show, adapted material, resources, ESL.*

For the last couple of years aspect of listening comprehension has been acquiring considerable popularity among linguists and teachers of English language. Although there are no doubts in importance of learning languages in communicative settings, gaps in the common listening strategize were found. One of the questions of contemporary English teaching is appliance of authentic resources for improvement of English learners’ listening skills.

Traditionally students deal with adjusted audio tracks during their studies. These tracks are featured by well-structured sequence of information presented, certain speed of replay which is chosen in accordance with students’ abilities, and rather clear pronunciation. Although everything possible is usually done to make audio-materials sound natural, adding of background noises and interruptions is unable to make students forget that they deal with an artificial product elaborated for their convenience. Moreover, one of the main goals of the conventional listening tracks is far and wide learning of usage of accurate grammar and lexis. However, it is obvious that in real-life experience students will meet another discourse — fluent and pared-down, discourse which is immanent to the native speakers and foreigners whose speech is not so faultless and bears an accent of some extent. Eventually, students end up to be prepared for examinations of different kind but can face considerable difficulties in the real-life conversation.

Authentic materials may be a key to this problem. By “authentic materials” we imply “...materials that have been produced to fulfil some social purpose in the language community” [1, p.2]. More specifically,

they are material implies any content created for native speakers of the language and representing rather natural atmosphere despite of the fact that some staging usually takes place. By way of instance of audible authentic materials such content can be mentioned as radio podcasts, news broadcasts talk-shows, sitcoms, and commercial. According to Widdowson, the idea that the material should be simplified for better understanding over time, was replaced by the preferences of authentic material [2, p.67]. Indeed, the materials specified and many others become the sours of not only lingual information, but cultural information as well. Watching videos or listening to a radio podcast provides students with opportunity of acquaintance with manners, behavior, body language, and conversational style which are as close as possible to the language’s habitat.

For this article “The Ellen DeGeneres Show” was chosen as one of the possible sources of authentic content. Materials of this show were selected and used on English lessons for university students who showed different levels of knowledge of English language.

Choice made is based on several reasons. First, the “talk-show” genre automatically implies a large amount of audio information received by students, whereas video itself is an additional source of non-verbal information, which often complements the audio or makes it easier to understand. In addition, this show is popular among native speakers and it covers topics of world events which worry the public. Among the context of this show interviews, tweets, puns, private speaker’s informant, and many others can be found; variety of recurring segments accustoms students to learn to

perceive completely different sources of information at once. Moreover, recurring segments of the show allow a teacher to select and repeat the same kinds of audio lessons, changing the lingual content.

On the technical side, one release of the show can be easily divided into short fragments. The Internet abounds with already prepared video-tracks of this show.

The most important, of course, is the vocabulary represented in “The Ellen DeGeneres Show”. The natural speech of speakers, their pronunciation and accent (representatives of completely different social, age and national groups participate in the show) give students the idea of real situations of communication with the native speakers. Agreeing with Guariento, we believe that the challenge to understand the material in the “real” language, the material that is understood by the native speakers, highly motivates students [3, p.347–351].

Undoubtedly, Senior was right telling that “...we need to have a clear pedagogic goal in mind: what precisely we want our students to learn from these materials” [4, p.71]. Choosing a specific fragment of the show for a lesson, it is critical to focus on character of results we expect from students. Solovova divides listening into the following two categories: academic listening and communicative listening. The first variant of listening is aimed at the introduction of language material, familiarization with linguistic forms and implies that students can listen to this audio/video as many times as it takes to fully understand the text. Communicative listening is aimed at understanding of oral speech from the first listening. The breadth and depth of students’ understanding can be different: from understanding the main content to the ability to give a critical assessment [3, p.349]. Selecting videos and assignments for them, we focus on the desired results.

One of the fragments of the show was used by us for presenting to students different variants of applying of “can/could” modal verb. The title of the fragment is “Wacky Japanese Inventions” [5]. “Ellen shared some odd products with her audience that were all created in Japan. Surprisingly, they’re all 100% real!” [5]. This fragment is full of phrases with the modal verb “can” in them. Both forms are used — the present and the past. The students were instructed to listen carefully to Ellen’s speech and to notice all the sentences containing this modal verb. Having watched the video once, the students had to bring the examples that they remembered. The visual series in which Ellen shows the objects and shows up on their account, were supposed to help students call to the mind the phrases used by her. At the first viewing, students should have only selected the modal verb in the speech. During the second viewing they were asked to pay attention to the structure of the sentence with the modal verb and to think about an adequate translation. Further, students were asked to determine the role of this modal verb.

During the conversation, the group of students came to the conclusion that modal verb “can” expresses the possibility of any action in the present or possibility of it to be performed in the past or the general assumption that action is an option. In terms of knowledge reinforcement, students answered questions: “How can you use this item?”, “Where could you use it?”

As we can see, this type of activity included both listening, and practice of oral speech and — mainly — analysis of the grammar, although the level of complexity here is low. Students do not need a full understanding of the context.

The video “Ellen Cooks with Padma Lakshmi” was used for a better familiarization with the theme “Cooking” [6]. “The beautiful culinary guru was in the house whipping up some delicious recipes for fall” [6]. The video is a lively interview, during which Ellen and her guest discuss many things at once and in parallel they try to cook. Utterances overlay each other, the speech speed is high enough, and this video shows a lot of details on different subjects. We believe that it is most suitable and challenging for upper-intermediate and advanced level students.

For this fragment several different tasks were created. In the first assignment students are presented with extracts of the dialogue between Ellen and her guest Padma. These are small extracts, the length of which is approximately two or three phrases of colloquial English. The students’ task is to supplement these extracts with the expressions heard in the video.

The second task for the video is aimed at the practice of a process description. As input, students are given a set of words used in the video during the cooking instructions. Their goal in this task is to reproduce recipe mentioned and to reveal the stages of cooking with all the nuances.

Common understanding of the entire stream of speech provided in the video is checked in the third task. This task is presented as a series of questions regarding the information from the video, such as: “Does Ellen do cooking at home and does she have someone to feed with this food?” or “How has Padma learned that she is a supertaster?”

Another fragment involves celebrities and is called “Nicki Minaj introduces Ellen to the Rap Game”. Despite the fact that this video is not of significant lengths, it can be used as a start point of a discussion owing to the wide interest of contemporary teens to the music industry. Understanding of the content can be checked by questions. In addition, being an ambiguous star, Nicki Minaj awakens interest and excitement in students.

Thus, “The Ellen DeGeneres Show” is a great source of authentic videos, and we would assume that each teacher could find fragments suitable for their classroom.

However, when selecting fragments, it is necessary to evaluate carefully students level of language.

Indeed, student's level has a great importance in work implying authentic materials. It would appear that at some point adopted materials are more efficient as learners of elementary or even pre-intermediate levels usually find it hard to perceive any kind of audible information whether it is produced by their teacher or is a specially arranged audio-track. Probably, this can be explained by the fact that at the initial stages of learning, as Hamouda says, universities pay more attention to grammar, reading, and vocabulary than to listening activities [7, pp.113–115].

In conclusion it may be worth of mentioning that we consider listening to be one of the most difficult kinds of language activity on the lesson, partly because the processes of listening in real communication

are irreversible and practically does not lend itself to self-observation, analysis and fixation. In the conditions of a school or a university, the receptive activity is limited to communication among students and students with a teacher. Only in exceptional cases communication can have a natural character (if teacher himself is a native speaker or the lesson is attended by students and foreign guests, as speakers of the language). Obviously, students should be acquainted aurally with foreign-language authentic information. "The Ellen DeGeneres Show", in our opinion, is an excellent source of information on the account of providing fairly short and at the same time complex fragments, and the main advantage is that when students comprehend the content they show it by laughter.

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