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Abstract

This paper explores the use of TV journals in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts and the students' perceptions of its effects on their English listening comprehension and writing. During six months, forty-three students were required to keep a TV journal that combined television viewing and writing about the programs watched, with exchange of teacher's feedback and students' written reflections. Some statistical procedures applied to a student questionnaire were combined with the qualitative analysis of the logs. The analysis of the questionnaire revealed the students' belief that the TV journal helped them progress in listening and writing. Likewise, a positive correlation was found between the hours spent in the task and the students' self-reported progress. Furthermore, the logs evidenced the students' improvement in writing fluency, as entries became longer and clearer. In conclusion, according to the students, the TV journals helps improve both listening and writing abilities in English.

Palabras clave Journals, television, EFL, listening, writing

TV journals for enhancing English writing and listening skills: The students' perceptions

Resumen

Este artículo explora el uso del diario de televisión en la clase de inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) y la perspectiva de los estudiantes sobre los efectos de la actividad en su comprensión oral y escritura en inglés. Se les pidió a cuarenta y tres estudiantes que durante seis meses vieran televisión en inglés y llevaran un diario sobre los programas vistos, en el cual se compartían los comentarios del profesor y las reflexiones de los estudiantes. Se combinaron cálculos estadísticos con el análisis cualitativo de los diarios. El análisis del cuestionario reveló que los estudiantes aseguraban que el diario los ayudó a progresar en su escritura y comprensión oral en inglés. Igualmente, se determinó una correlación positiva entre las horas dedicadas a la actividad y el progreso reportado. Además, en el diario se evidenció el desarrollo de su fluidez en la escritura, reflejado en las entradas cada vez más largas y claras. En conclusión, según los estudiantes, el uso del diario de televisión mejora tanto las habilidades de comprensión oral como de escritura en inglés.

Key words Diarios, televisión, ILE, comprensión oral, escritura

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on prospective EFL teachers' perceptions of their development of listening and writing skills through the completion of a TV journal. Enhancing the students' communicative competence is one of the major goals of the English Education Program at one of the largest Venezuelan universities. In Venezuela, English is taught as a mandatory subject in middle and high schools, and since the mid-1980s, syllabi have to be designed in accordance with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) poses a challenge in EFL settings because of the lack of enough input outside the classroom. In fact, after high school completion, most Venezuelans have not achieved communicative competence in English (Chacón, 2005).

This study was conducted in the context of the core course "English II," which is a low-intermediate subject of the English Education Program at the University of Los Andes, Venezuela that integrates the four language skills with an emphasis on writing. As the instructors of the course, we decided to incorporate TV viewing and journal writing as an integrated approach to expose students to the linguistic, situational, and cultural clues that television provides in order to help them improve their listening skills and guide them through a process of self-evaluation of their acquisition of the English language. At the same time, we sought to explore how they perceived the effects that the assignment had on their language development.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Do students perceive the use of TV journals as having an effect on the development of their listening comprehension in English?
2. Do students perceive the use of TV journals as having an effect on the development of their English writing fluency?
3. Is there a relationship between the amount of time students' watched TV and their self-reported English listening and writing progress?
4. Did the researchers find any evidence in the TV journals that supported the students' self-perceived writing progress?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Television in the English class

TV provides language learners with context, aural stimuli, and non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expression, and body language. It may also offer culturally authentic input and an excellent chance for language learners to observe social interactions and meaning negotiation strategies such as turn taking, pauses, and fillers, which keep natural conversation going. Research (Dickson, 1994; Ennis, 1997; Grant and Starks, 2001) has shown that by using videos, satellite transmissions, and other forms of technology, students can better interact with language in a much more realistic way.

Dickson (1994) used TV recorded videos with a group of Scottish college students learning French. During three years, she kept track of the students' listening and speaking progress. Videos were grouped by themes and the students were given guidance by using context and worksheets to check

their comprehension.

Likewise, Ennis (1997) used a content-based approach working with TV to teach EFL to college students in France. Ennis used TV viewing in combination with class discussion and writing and reading of journal entries to develop the four skills and cultural awareness. TV viewing provided the input for in-class writing, discussion, and meaning negotiation.

Similarly, Grant and Starks (2001) used the New Zealand weeknight soap opera *Shortland Street* for class analysis. Their purpose was to compare natural conversation closings of soap operas with closings presented in textbooks. These authors concluded that one of the advantages of TV soap operas is the contextualization of closings and use of body language. They argue that scripted textbooks are generally out of date and may not be an accurate reflection of the language that learners can hear outside the classroom. In addition, textbooks are more restrictive and limited than video from TV, which provides a much richer and varied range of conversation endings. These authors claim that closings such as “see you whenever,” “be seeing you,” “spot you later,” “catch you later,” “I’ll ring you later,” “night-night” (p. 45) are not frequently found in textbooks.

2.2. TV as an authentic source of input

In this study, television programs represented the source of natural input. Watching TV programs and movies that the students chose and writing entries in their journals was a natural communicative situation. TV viewing served as “meaning-bearing” input that facilitated “form-meaning connections” (Lee and VanPatten, 1995, p. 38) to write the journals. As Lee and VanPatten (1995) suggest, learners process

input for meaning before they process it for form.

Giving the students the option of choosing what to watch facilitated the selection of what they liked and were able to understand according to their individual level. Krashen (1988) claims that the best activities for language acquisition should be natural, interesting, and understood, where “i+1 will ‘naturally’ be covered and reviewed many times over” (p. 104). Using TV watching as a task to write a journal allows freedom to choose and see the same program, series, or movie as many times as students want or need. At the same time, watching TV in a relaxing atmosphere at home may contribute to lower the learner’s affective filter (Krashen, 1988). When the learner’s affective filter is low, the input is more likely to be received; the TV journal task helped lower anxiety because students were not required to listen and react immediately.

Moreover, this listening and writing assignment was designed to encourage students to apply the set of Oxford’s (1990) language learning strategies they already knew. In another study (Chacón and Reyes, 2003, 2005), the authors had used Oxford’s cognitive, metacognitive, affective, and compensation strategies to train the students in overcoming language learning difficulties and assist them in planning, carrying out, and assessing their individual process of learning, as well as to face the listening and writing challenges by themselves, so as to start acting as autonomous language learners. The authors concluded that strategy training helped students cope with listening and writing limitations and fostered their autonomy and self-regulation.

2.3. TV journaling

In this study, journals are the students' accounts of the weekly TV activity they kept throughout the school year. The TV journals had characteristics of both response journals—traditionally used to record reactions to the content of stories that have been read or heard—and dialogue journals, in which exchanges occur on a regular basis, the teacher replies to questions or comments, and communication is the main goal (Peyton, 2000).

The major purpose of journaling was to allow students to systematically record the time they spent watching TV every week, and keep track of their listening and writing progress as time went by. Thus, journals were intended to help students practice their writing skills extensively and in a meaningful way by addressing an audience—the instructors—who kept an ongoing dialogue (Omaggio, 2001; Peyton, 2000) with them through weekly written feedback. Journals were used to help lower the students' affective filter (Krashen, 1988), since they could write freely with emphasis on meaning rather than accuracy (Ferris, 2003), in a non-threatening atmosphere, at home and at their own pace.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Forty-three students enrolled in the third-year English II course participated in the study during a period of six months (November-May). All of them were Spanish native speakers learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) as undergraduate students in the English Education Program. Students enrolled in the English II course had a low-

intermediate level of proficiency in the English language. The 43 participants were involved in the quantitative and qualitative procedures followed in this study.

3.2. Data collection

3.2.1. Journal entries: One month after the term started, students enrolled in the core course English II were required to start the TV journal task, which would last six months. The requirement included handing in every week a written journal whose entries reported on at least eight hours of TV viewing in English. Each entry had to contain the date, schedule, network channel, title of the show, and a descriptive summary of the content. In addition, they were asked to include a short written reaction to the content of the program.

The students turned in their weekly journals every Monday; we gave them feedback and took notes about the entries showing significance, evidence of progress, and meaningful reflection. Feedback was given to help student overcome listening difficulties and to encourage them to increase writing fluency in terms of length of the entries, content clarity and reflection depth. As Ferris (2003) points out, journal writing is usually “writing that was not revised (and is typically very expressive and focused on fluency and ideas rather than on rhetorical or syntactic form)” (p. 33). For this reason, we put emphasis on ideas and only looked over major accuracy problems, such as subject-verb agreement, gerunds after prepositions, and verb tenses, with the purpose of revisiting them in the Grammar class, taught by one of the researchers.

After three months, the number of hours was reduced to four a week, but

the students were required to incorporate reflection upon the experience of watching TV and journaling as well as the difficulties of the activity and the ways they overcame them. When the school year ended, the students handed in all the journals in a portfolio, including all the entries they had written since the beginning of the activity together with a self-evaluation of their progress during the English II course.

3.2.2 Questionnaire: Additionally, a questionnaire in Spanish was designed and administered to the 43 students at the end of the term. The purpose of the instrument was to gather information about the total number of hours each participant had spent watching TV, their favorite network channels and shows, the skills they believed they had improved through this practice, and how they rated their progress in English listening and writing.

The questionnaire consisted of 12 items, from which only items 2, 7, 8, and 9 are taken into account for this paper. Item 2 was an open-ended question asking, "How many hours did you spend watching TV since you started the weekly journal?" Items 7 and 8 used a Likert-type format on a scale of 1 through 5, to ask, "How much have you improved your listening with this activity," and "How much have you improved your writing with this activity". Item 9, asked student to mark with an "X" the abilities (listening speaking, reading, writing, culture knowledge) they thought they had improved the most with the weekly journal.

3.3 Data analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to assess the participants'

self-reported progress in listening and writing. The analysis of the descriptive statistics of items 2, 7, 8, and 9 of the questionnaire was conducted using the software SPSS 15.0.

For analyzing item 2, we computed the average and standard deviation of the total hours of TV viewing. Items 7 and 8 in the questionnaire consisted of a Likert-type scale in which students would rate from 1 (no improvement) through 5 (major improvement) their self-perceived progress in listening and writing skills. Both items were analyzed in terms of frequencies and percentages as was item 9, in which students had to select the English abilities they believed they had improved by accomplishing the TV journal task.

On the other hand, the journals and final reflections represented a source of qualitative data that contained the students' responses about their self-perceived progress in listening and their writing samples that would serve to confirm or refute the students' reported improvement in writing. After the last submission of the journals, the entries, the final reflections, and the self-evaluation were examined by the researchers in order to identify the instances in which the students claimed having difficulty (at the beginning of the task) or ease (as the task proceeded) in understanding the English spoken in the shows or movies. Students' statements that implied a decrease in difficulty to understand the English from the TV show or movie were registered as self-reported claims that their aural comprehension had evolved.

In addition, the authors looked for evidence of increased writing fluency that coincided with the two criteria employed for giving feedback to the students, that is,

content length and clarity. Each student's logs were chronologically compared in terms of length increase and development of content clarity and relevance. Those journals that met both criteria were classified as displaying advances in writing fluency.

4. Results

This study aimed at determining the perceptions of prospective EFL teachers on their progress in listening comprehension and written production in English throughout the completion of a TV journal. In this section, we present the more relevant outcomes that served to give an answer to the research questions.

The first research question sought to explore if the students perceived that the TV journal activity had had an effect on their listening comprehension in English. Item 7 in the questionnaire read, "On a scale of 1 to 5, rate your English listening comprehension improvement thanks to the TV journal" ("1=no improvement," "2=very little improvement," "3=minor improvement," "4=moderate improvement," "5=major improvement"). All 43 students rated their aural comprehension improvement between moderate (n=23) and major (n=20). Meanwhile, when item 9 asked them to select the English abilities they had developed through the completion of the TV journal (among "Listening," "Speaking," "Reading," "Writing," and "Knowledge of Culture"), about 90% of participants (n=39) marked the "Listening" option. This outcome shows that the great majority demonstrated outstanding awareness of their gains in listening comprehension.

The journal entries served as an effective medium of communication

between the class and the English instructor and as a record of the students' experiences with the listening task. Students got teacher feedback that helped them cope with their limitations and face problems such as anxiety and listening constraints. This provided an ideal reassurance that made the group go on with the task and get the best results from it. The following verbatim transcriptions display the evolution of a student that, by means of a dialogue with her instructor, managed to control her anxiety, limitations, and lack of interest and, at the end, obtained aural comprehension benefits from the TV journal.

Marisabel kept the on-going communication with the instructor and after a month she wrote, "I also watch the film twice. In this form I compare what I understood and in the second time I learn other words" (April 10). Even though she succeeded in developing learning strategies according to her necessities, she never hid her apprehension over the task. In her final reflection she wrote, "I dislike the journals, this strategy is very bad for me because I don't like watch TV too much." Interestingly enough, she was able to acknowledge that her English had experienced certain growth thanks to the assignment, "the area of English in which I have made the most progress in this course is in writing."

Like Marisabel, a few students reported on their disappointment at the early stages of the activity mainly because they were not used to watching TV in English. However, all of them eventually noticed they were building their listening comprehension and started to enjoy TV viewing. Marisabel was the only student that never got to like the assignment, despite the fact that she acknowledged having improved her writing by completing the TV journal.

- Marisabel¹: It is strange because I never had watched TV without read subtitles. I'm sad because I don't understand too much. People speak very fast and I feel frustrated. It's difficult watch TV in this form. I understand a little words. I feel bored but in this moment I wish to accustom and I relate the context while a listen. I have too much limitations. I don't know what do I do? (Feb. 15)
- Well, I think you should keep on watching TV and relax. Don't think about your limitations, but the ways to overcome them.
- Instructor: I feel better but my anxiety isn't quiet. I pay attention for I get the message. I take note of words repeat too much and after I translate with dictionary's help.
- Marisabel: I feel happy when I understand one word. People speak very fast and I don't understand too much, I will choose a film where people don't speak too fast. Maybe I began too late and I have many limitations. I don't like to watch TV in this form. I don't know how encourage myself. Sometimes I understand some words and I'm happy, but it is too little. I take note of words that I repeat every time and I translate it and memorize its meaning. After I try to remember and repeat it (March 06).
- Watch programs that you like. Have fun and relax. No matter if you don't understand. Try to guess, use the context.
- Instructor: I accustom to watch TV in English. In this moment, I try to organize my strategies because I improved for my personal development of English language. Before
- Marisabel: I watched every program in English, but now I chose the program that I like to watch because this is the easiest form to learn new words (March 27).

With regard to the second question of this research, the answers to the questionnaire and the journals were analyzed to determine if the participants believed that they had had any writing achievement with the completion of the TV journal. Item 8 in the questionnaire requested, "On a scale of 1 to 5, rate the improvement of your English writing after the TV journal task" ("1=no improvement," "2=very little improvement," "3=minor improvement," "4=moderate improvement," "5=major

improvement"). Thirty-five participants rated their writing progress as moderate (n=16) or major (n=19). Nonetheless, two students considered having achieved very little or no improvement at all in this area. A plausible explanation for this kind of judgment might be that the question did not specify the aspects of writing improvement (fluency and content clarity) that they were supposed to rate, so those students still presenting accuracy issues may have felt their writing had not progressed substantially with

the assignment. In fact, when asked to mark the English abilities they had developed with the TV journal (item 9), only about 53% of them ($n=23$) chose "Writing."

The third research question of the study enquired whether there was a relationship between the time each student were engaged in the TV journal activity and their reported progress in English listening and writing. Item 2 in the questionnaire asked for the total number of hours they had watched television in English since the beginning of the task. The average number of hours was 35.02, with a standard deviation of 9.73. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed to examine the association between the total number of hours of TV viewing and the students' perceived progress in listening and writing. Findings reveal a moderate positive correlation ($r=.24$) between the total number of hours students watched TV and their reported progress in listening (Davis, 1971). In the same way, a moderate positive correlation ($r=.37$) was found between the total number of hours students watched TV and their self-perceived writing improvement. These results indicate that as the number of hours of TV watching increased, so did the students' progress in listening and writing in English, as reported by them.

Regarding research question 4, we wanted to determine if the journals displayed any evidence of development in the students' writing that would match their own perceptions of writing progress. The examination of the entries in terms of evolution in writing fluency and content clarity revealed that all participants' logs exhibited a chronological and gradual

increase of paragraph length and content clarity, the latter manifested in the use of more description of the characters and their interactions, as well as explanations of the evolution of events in the plot.

The following excerpts from the students' journals denote they progressively built their writing fluency, content significance, and clarity. The student writing presented here was chosen based on dramatic improvement in understandability and length of paragraphs, as in Johnny's case, who was able to write only single words or phrases at the beginning of the task and eventually started composing complete paragraphs. The sample entries are shown chronologically.

Cecilia

From November to January, Cecilia added details of the characters and the plot most of the time, but her entries were brief.

Donna talked with her best friend Kelly about how she is feeling about David, she told her that she can't see David with other girl because she feel jealous (November).

In February, she wrote longer entries:

In the high school the others boy and girls think that Mona is ugly and because of that she doesn't have friends. One day in sewing class Mona sat next to Ruby, a shy girl that was an excellent seamstress, since then they began to be friends (February).

By March 11, Cecilia's writing shows some advances, particularly in length and

meaning. She kept writing longer entries and added more details. In the following log, she wrote about *Billy Elliot*:

This is a movie about a boy that loves the ballet. His mother is dead, because of that his father takes care of him. His brother also cares of him and his grandmother. Both (his father and brother) are miners and they pass for difficult moments; their only moments of calmness is in the social club of the miners where they enjoy drinking and arguing.

At the school, Billy doesn't like very much sports and his father wants him to box and gives him money for some lessons, but Billy hates boxing. One day, Billy is in his box class and in the other classroom there is a ballet class so Billy prefers watching that. The ballet teacher asks him to join the class, and after thinking a lot he decides enter to the class. There he discover his love for ballet. Billy's father and brother are furious and tell him to stop, but Billy continues doing ballet in secret. Finally, his father understands and helps him to find a place in an important school of Ballet.

Indira

From November to January, Indira as well as Cecilia wrote very brief entries—between two and four lines. Although her writing had some meaning, it was not very organized.

Kelly tells to her mother that she has a boyfriend his name is Bert and Jack makes a lot of jokes about Kelly's boyfriend and Kelly starts to say that

she want to marry with him and her mother is worried about that (January 11).

By February 18, she started to write longer entries, and her writing made more sense. In her entry on *Moulin Rouge*, she wrote:

This movie is about a man and a prostitute, Satine. He fell in love with her when he went to Paris in 1899. Everybody thinks that Christian is a duke, but he is a writer, so Satine seduces him because she thinks that he is the duke that her boss sent, then they start singing and they notice are falling in love.

After that, the real duke buys her because he wants Satine for him, but the love between Satine and Christian is too big. Finally Satine perform live, but at the show she die because she has tuberculosis and Christian wrote about Satine and their story of love (April 4).

As illustrated, Indira's last entry is longer, more organized, and therefore clearer. Her writing improved not only in content but also in form.

Johnny

Johnny was a particular case. Initially, at the beginning of November, he understood and reported only single words and phrases. For example, in his entry on November 14, he listed, "about that," "talking," "house". Then, as he kept doing the activity, he started to understand meaningful chunks from the movies, "she's my wife," "oh, my God," "times up" [time's up]. By the end of November, he wrote very short

paragraphs—three or four sentences—, which lacked intelligibility because of issues such as word choice and order:

It's about a girl that dead in accident. After her death, she was chosen to save the people's soul before dead them, because if she doesn't it, so a bad monkeys caught them and carry them to hell.

In early February, he wrote about *Buffy*, and his writing was not completely intelligible: "In every chapter she fights together her friends, but she is who save them always, so there is sometimes that they are who save her in some cases."

By the middle of March, the content of his entries improved, requiring less effort to be understood. Describing *Armageddon*, he wrote:

There was a group of men that were working in a petroleum company that had been chosen by to destroy with the big meteor. They had to bore the meteor's surface to put there various bombs to exploit it and to save the planet Earth.

In late April, his writing continued showing indications of growth in length and meaning. By the end of May, he kept progressing and his writing had more coherence and even less accuracy problems. Recounting *X-Men*, he summarized:

This is a science-fiction movie in which there are many strange individuals because they suffer a reaction to radioactive explosion and their bodies

transformed with different powers. All they were rejected by the society and they were frustrated before this situation and some of them, of these mutants made bad things as well as to steal, to assault and they were devoted to the delinquency... There was a school that was dedicated for the mutants in which there were mutants with big powers and it was directed by a man: the Professor Xavier. This professor had mental powers but he had a former partner that had magnetic powers. This mutant called himself Magneto, a powerful man that wanted to conquer the world for its plans of wickedness, he was frustrated because the society rejected the mutants and he had several mutants with powers that used to make the bad. There was a great fight among these mutants and at the end winners finished the professor's good mutants and they saved to the world (May 29).

Silvia

Silvia's writing was also difficult to understand because of structure limitations and organization flaws. Her entry about *That body is not mine* is an example of her early writing:

This was about changing of the bodies between a woman and a man. All it begins because the girl buys some earring an INDU store and these earrings were charmed. Then, the girl just wore an earring and the man wore the other and they change their bodies. After she was the man and he was the girl. Finally the soul comes back to

each one of them and all of this comes back to normality (November 18).

In February, her entries evidenced a slight improvement in organization:

This movie is about the life of an ordinary man, Peter Parker, a young boy who gets involve in an incredible story when he is bitten by a spider. In the movie, Peter lives with his uncles Ben and May; they love him much but it is the murder of his uncle Ben who gives Peter an invaluable lessons: “with great power, must also comes great responsibility” (February 8).

By May 23, Silvia’s writing was clearer:

The movie is about a demon brought to our world trough a magic spell, which was done by Rasputin. This demon was raised by humans and became a fighter at service of justice, when Rasputin comes back from the past; he wants to recover his demon to open a portal that will allow monsters to come to our world.

Considering the above samples, it can be asserted that TV journaling gave the students an opportunity to build on their writing fluency and make themselves understood. Writing growth is evident even for those students whose entries initially lacked comprehensibility due to lexical and structure limitations. This finding supports the students’ perceptions on having progressed in their writing abilities.

5. Conclusion

The TV Journal was a meaningful twofold assignment in which students engaged in extensive listening that in the end improved their aural comprehension and writing fluency, as they had to write down what they had understood and experienced during the activity. This task turned out to be a useful listening and writing tool for students to practice English at their own pace, to enhance reflection upon their progress, and to communicate with the instructors expressing their fears, anxiety, desperation, as well as their sense of achievement and growth as English users.

Students reported having improved both listening and writing through the completion of the TV journal task and there was a positive correlation between their self-reported progress and the number of hours they were engaged in the activity. The authors also observed in the students’ journals what could be defined as evident increase in writing fluency, based on the criteria previously set. This outcome coincides with the students’ perception of writing progress. Nonetheless, further research needs to be conducted to look for evidence in the journals that might identify specific advances in the students’ use of morphology and syntax.

A limitation of this study is that there were no measurements of the participants’ listening comprehension progress. Therefore, it was not possible to contrast the students’ judgment with another source of listening assessment. Nevertheless, despite this limitation, this study reports on varied advantages of TV watching and journaling, which suggests that implementing TV

journals in the EFL class may be a way for students to not only develop their language skills, but also to get involved in a process of reflection and self discovery that allows them to become autonomous language learners and, consequently, successful language users.

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Note

- 1 Students' names used here are pseudonyms.

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