

The Effectiveness of Multimodal Situation Creation in English Sitcoms for Oral English Learning - A Case Study of *Inside No.9*

Xin Xia^{1*}, Zhongmin Li¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Hunan University of Arts & Science, Changde, Hunan, China

Email Address

836482339@qq.com (Xin Xia), lzm1988jimmy@125.com (Zhongmin Li)

*Correspondence: 836482339@qq.com

Received: 7 June 2023; **Accepted:** 22 July 2023; **Published:** 11 September 2023

Abstract:

Films and television series have always been viewed as effective resources for language learning. A sitcom, a portmanteau of situation comedy, is a genre of comedy focusing on a fixed set of characters and situation to achieve humorous or hilarious effect. With dense lines and attractive plots, English sitcoms are ideal resources for English learning, providing multi-channels for language input. Based on multimodal theory, this study analyzed the effectiveness of multimodal situation creation in English sitcoms on facilitating speaking learning through a case study of an English sitcom *Inside No.9*. Results show that multimodal situation creation in English sitcoms can stimulate students' interests in English learning, trigger situational recall to revisit English knowledge, promote communicative phonological learning, mobilize multimodal phonological learning channels, and provide an immersive learning environment. The results of the study suggest that English teachers should focus on multimodal input and scenario creation and make use of film and television resources to improve the effectiveness of oral language instruction.

Keywords:

English Speaking, Multimodality, Sitcom, Immerse Learning

1. Introduction

The purpose of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate in that language, and for this reason, in foreign language teaching, speaking has always been given the top priority of significance. However, the English education in China is often criticized for neglecting learners' speaking and listening ability, producing "dumb and deaf" English learners. The exam-oriented English teaching in China focuses on writing and reading, which deviates from the communicative purpose of language learning and attenuates students' interests of learning. With the upgrading of multimedia teaching technology, the integration of audio-visual resources into speaking teaching is gradually becoming popular and is receiving more and more

attention from teachers and researchers. This study took the English sitcom *Inside No.9* as an example to interpret why English sitcoms are effective for speaking learning and how does multimodal situation creation in English sitcoms facilitate students' learning.

2. The Importance of Oral English

Language is an important communication tool for human beings and a carrier of information transmission. People can generally remember 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they hear and see, and 70% of what they say in the process of communication. This means that if one can both hear and see, and then express it in one's own language through discussion and communication, the retention of knowledge will reach the longest. Therefore, the importance of spoken English cannot be overstated.

In oral language, "listening" is the foundation, and "speaking" is the process of hearing information from the outside world and then outputting it in order to exchange information [1]. The interaction between the teacher and the students or between the students requires the outputter to listen carefully and to understand the speaker's meaning in order to adjust the intention, speed and emotion of the speech. Moreover, in the process of speaking English more often and in the process of constantly correcting pronunciation, students will become more aware of the language and will not be in a situation where they do not know what to say when the listening material is played out because much of the English words they read is inherently wrong.

Many linguists believe that reading comprehension relies heavily on oral comprehension[2]. Therefore, reading comprehension can also be facilitated through oral training. Reading training in the classroom is also expressed through oral language, such as reading aloud, oral retelling, oral response, extended discussion, etc. This not only trains the students' oral expression ability, but also deepens the reading comprehension and improves the evaluation and appreciation of reading. On the basis of more reading and more speaking, vocabulary is improved, grammatical structure is consolidated, language materials are accumulated, and the improvement of oral expression ability is likely to bring about a change in written expression ability.

3. Multimodal Input for Language Learning

3.1. Multimodality theory

Multimodality theory, also known as multimodal communication or multimodal discourse analysis, is an interdisciplinary approach that focuses on the study of communication and meaning-making through multiple modes or channels [3]. It recognizes that communication involves not only language but also various other semiotic resources, such as images, gestures, sounds, spatial arrangements, etc. The concept of multimodality has been developed and expanded upon by various scholars. They have explored how different modes work together in various contexts and how meaning is constructed through the integration of verbal and non-verbal elements [4].

The theory emphasizes that different modes work together to convey meaning and understanding. Each mode carries its own unique set of resources, rules, and conventions, and they interact and integrate to create a rich and complex communication experience. The modes can include verbal language, visual elements, body language, auditory signals, tactile sensations, and even spatial organization.

The development of multimodality theory is rooted in the recognition that human communication extends beyond words alone and that meaning is shaped by the interplay of various sensory and cognitive processes. While traditional approaches to communication have focused predominantly on linguistic analysis, multimodality theory encourages a broader perspective, considering all the available modes and how they interact within a specific context [5]. Multimodality theory has important implications for language learning and teaching. It recognizes that language learning involves more than just the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. It highlights the role of multiple modes in the learning process, and by integrating various modes of communication, language learning materials can provide learners with multiple cues and resources to help them understand and make meaning of the language.

3.2. The Role of Audio-visual Resources in Language Learning

Audio-visual resources play a significant role in language learning by providing learners with dynamic and engaging content that helps improve their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills[6]. These resources combine both auditory and visual elements, making the learning process more immersive and effective.

For one thing, audio-visual resources can maximize students' attention and motivation. This is because they use the most innovative and compelling materials of the day. The original English films and videos have vivid images and a natural cultural atmosphere, which can vividly reproduce real language communication situations. Students are excited to watch them and learn in a relaxed atmosphere, turning boring traditional teaching into an enjoyable way for students to watch movies [6].

Secondly, compared with other teaching resources, videos in films or TV series are often more intuitive, realistic and easy to understand, and can transcend the limitations of time and space. They create a sensory stimulating input environment for learners, integrating sound, picture and language, and thus enhancing the quality of language input. Students can well substitute for the main characters in the film and television, feel everything in the film and television, and immerse themselves in this realistic image environment.

Thirdly, the large amount of cultural background materials is a window to the knowledge of English language and culture. Language is deeply intertwined with culture, and audio-visual resources provide learners with insights into the target language's cultural aspects. Through videos, films, and documentaries, learners can observe cultural practices, traditions, and social interactions, enabling them to understand and appreciate the cultural context of the language they are learning [7].

Furthermore, audio-visual resources present language in context, which helps learners understand how words and phrases are used in real-life situations. Learners can observe the body language, gestures, and facial expressions of speakers, aiding in comprehension and helping them understand the appropriate use of language. Audio-visual resources engage multiple senses simultaneously, combining auditory and visual input. This multimodal learning approach enhances memory retention and recall, making it easier for learners to internalize and remember new language patterns and structures [8].

4. The Effectiveness of Multimodal Situational Creation on Oral English Learning

In this part, the effectiveness of multimodal situational creation on oral English learning will be discussed along with a case study of an English sitcom *Inside No.9*, which is a critically acclaimed British sitcom. What sets the show apart is its anthology format, where each episode tells a self-contained story with different characters and settings. The series is known for its dark and often twisted humor, unexpected plot twists, intricate writing, and clever narrative structures. The episodes are crafted with meticulous attention to detail, with hidden clues, intricate foreshadowing, and intricate storylines that often reward attentive viewers.

4.1. Stimulating Learning Interest

Students are the most dynamic part of the society, and it is their greatest characteristic to follow the trend. If teachers can analyze the most popular things in the classroom, students' interest in learning will be aroused and their initiative in learning will be greatly enhanced.

For example, the sardine game, which has been popular on various video platforms, has been a hot topic among students. The sardine game is from the first episode of the first season of the sitcom *Inside No.9*. The story takes place at a party where everyone plays a game called sardines. The first person first finds a place to hide, and then the party people in turn to find him, and then hide together, and finally because there is a person Ian was not found, so the game cannot end. And the camera pans to the outside of the closet, and someone is outside locking the closet shut. A person who calls himself Ivan sprinkles gasoline on the floor and turns on the lighter. The secret thing satisfies the little black hole inside the students while propping them up even more. Once the teacher brings the hot topic to the classroom for analysis, the students will show tremendous motivation.

In a traditional classroom, students have limited attention span and tend to get distracted. Whereas, the plot of a typical movie or TV show goes in a fascinating and interesting direction, which attracts students to keep watching. For example, in the sixth episode of the third season of *Inside No.9*, the story opens with the unnatural death of someone, and the atmosphere becomes tense at once. Then the camera pans around and finds out that it is a private exhibition where only a few people are invited, including a visually impaired elderly person, a caregiver, a third-tier actress, a university professor, and several unrelated people who are somehow invited to visit. Immediately afterwards, the caregiver was stabbed, the actress was fed acid, the old man had his eyes gouged out, and the invitees died one by one, bringing the plot to its climax. The audience's curiosity was developed to the extreme, paying close attention to the words and actions of the characters in the play, trying to find out the real killer.

The combination of audiovisual and multimodal language input can motivate students to learn more than a single text input. Many English learners may not understand the original English text, but the combination of audio and visual interpretation in this episode will give learners a deeper understanding of this works.

4.2. Promoting Scenario Recall

Many movies and TV works leave clues in the previous clips or repeatedly appear an important clue. When you find a back-and-forth episode, you will recall the

previous scenes to get clues and satisfy curiosity to increase the pleasure of watching the movie, which provides more potential opportunities for practice and imitation. For example, in the second episode of the second season of *Inside No.9*, Kristen's 12 days, the heroine's twelve days reflect her entire life. At the end, on one particular birthday, the heroine finds that everyone around her is gathered. It turns out that the heroine was in a car accident, and all the scenes are images of her deathbed. At this point, the audience will also continue to recall the previous clues, for example, in the seventh day, the heroine worried about her child being robbed, heard the dialogue machine "Come on, little man, let's get you out of there." This echoes the words spoken by the man in the raincoat when he saved the heroine's child in the car accident. The foreshadowing allows the learners to recall these episodes and recurring lines, providing more opportunities for practice. As a result, the corresponding words and sentence patterns are unconsciously mastered by the learners through constant recall of the scenes.

English sitcoms are rich in sensory effects that give people empathy and a strong sense of immersion. At the end of the movie, learners often empathize with the main character and recall the plot development, increasing the opportunities for practice. For example, in the first episode of *Inside No.9*, a sad story of martyrdom for love under the cover of classmates' reunion, has a slightly melancholic and nostalgic atmosphere. The so-called reunion is both the reality of the main character and old friends reunited after many years, but also with the dead lover of about a year in another world reunion. At the end of the movie, a lot of emotions can be aroused. It has been two years since the new epidemic hit the world, and life is full of loss, loss of the right to breathe freely, loss of loved ones, and even loss of life. We are constantly learning to adapt, just like the line "Life moves on", but many people, like Lawrence, the main character of this episode, are stuck in the same place, unable to move forward, missing the "good old days" alone. Life is but a dream, and people can relate to it.

4.3. Promoting Communicative Phonological Learning

English learners think differently as opposed to native speakers, and communicate differently as a result. In order to learn real English, learners need to pay attention to how native English speakers communicate in everyday life, which is less likely to happen around us. But communication in sitcoms is natural and relevant. For example, the fourth episode of the second season of *Inside No.9* has a lot of phone communication and communication between colleagues. We can feel that native English speakers are more concise in introducing themselves on the phone compared to Chinese, as seen in the boss teaching the main character how to answer the phone: "We like to pick up within three rings and begin every dialogue with "Hello, Comfort Supported Lined" don't mind if people use the abbreviation CSL".

Feel and learn from the sitcom that the words used are different and the tone of expression is different, as exemplified in in Episode 4, Season 2, *Inside No.9*:

Old lady: I'm sorry to bother you, but I just couldn't sleep. You see, Picasso died last week, and the house seems so empty without him. He was my cat, you see, and he meant the world to me. Hello?

Andy: Oh, well, he's just a cat.

Old lady: I beg your pardon?

Andy: It's just a cat. It sounds like you've got other ones, have you?

In this dialogue, we can sense the impatience in the hero's frequent use of "just". This contextualized lines give us a better sense of the speaker's emotion and enables us to use more accurate language in oral communication in the future.

By watching movies and videos, learners can imitate the accent and intonation of the actors. This helps learners to better understand the differences between the target speech and their native language and improve their ability to express communicative speech. For example, the main character Leon in the second episode of the fourth season of *Inside No.9* came to life during rehearsals when he played the accent of people speaking in different parts of England. He spoke the lines "Oh, Mr. Kirk. Is that a wee Scots name, Jimmy?" with Scottish accent and "As a matter of fact, my father was born in Ireland" with Irish accent. The rich facial expressions and exaggerated accent of the main character make people laugh and start to imitate them subconsciously.

4.4. Providing Immersive Learning Environment

Non-native English speakers often learn English in areas that are highly specialized and have significant differences from our culture, such as words related to the courtroom, which we find very difficult. But if it is in a sitcom, especially one where the entire episode takes place around a certain theme, then students can immerse themselves in the episode and learn systematically. For example, in the third episode of the second season of *Inside No.9*, Elizabeth Gage. The whole episode revolves around a witch trial, from "There is here in the village a young couple who claim their mother, Elizabeth is a sorceress and much talk of her devilry they do recount." to "We must give the hag a fair hearing". These obscure words come to life from the boring word books, giving students an immersive learning environment that can better help them use these words in future oral communication.

Appropriate lighting, background music, and couches in the scenarios create a learning-friendly environment for students to create an atmosphere of focused learning. For example, in the third episode of the third season of *Inside No.9*, Oedipus the King, with the theme of the Sphinx's crossword, the plot development advances through the solving of a crossword puzzle, and finally all the crosswords hide the whole process of the revenge story as well as the result between them, and also overlap the mythical story of the Sphinx. The high speed of the plot development, the high speed of the lines, the emotional rhythm of the lighting and background music all immerse the learner into the plot.

5. Pedagogical Implications

The above analysis indicates the multimodal scenario creation in the movie has a huge facilitating effect on students' speaking learning. In turn, this facilitative effect has many implications for teachers' speaking instruction.

Firstly, speaking instruction should be designed to stimulate students' interest in learning from all aspects. Only when students' interest in speaking learning is fully mobilized can students' learning initiative be fully developed. To stimulate students' interest, we can start from various angles. Selecting fresh and interesting materials to present interesting knowledge is the key, and activity design needs to be interesting and innovative, and it can be combined with the current popular elements or novel themes.

Secondly, oral language teaching should be designed in real situations. Applying knowledge to real situations is the only way to verify whether students have mastered the knowledge. At this point, teachers should make use of the technique of scenario simulation. It allows students to use and communicate their language knowledge by imagining situations and simulating roles. For example, in a business meeting scenario, students take on the role of a company executive and discuss the company's growth strategy, or discuss and solve internal management problems, etc. In this process, students can recall their previous experiences and interact with different roles in order to improve their oral expression skills.

Thirdly, the goal of oral language teaching is to promote communicative skills. The final goal of learning a language is to return to interpersonal communication and to be developed in communication. In order to improve students' communicative skills, teachers can guide students to do some group activities and communication exercises. These activities can include group discussion, debating, presentation, and role play, etc. Finally, teachers should pay special attention to the context of oral expressions.

Fourthly, speaking instruction should be taught in a variety of ways in order to engage students' multimodal channels. Teachers can use visual aids such as pictures and videos to help students better understand and master speaking knowledge and skills. For example, pictures can be used to explain parts of speech and videos can be used to demonstrate speaking expression skills. Students' oral listening training can also be enhanced by listening to model pronunciation and imitation exercises. Providing a timely feedback mechanism helps students correct pronunciation errors and improve their oral expression. Teachers can record students' speaking performance through audio recordings, videos, and classroom performances for assessment and feedback.

In addition, in teaching spoken English, teachers need to choose the most effective audio-visual resources according to specific teaching needs, and try to create the most realistic language environment, stimulate students' interest, mobilize students' enthusiasm to the greatest extent, realize the promotion of English film and television multimodal situation creation for speaking learning, and achieve the best teaching effect.

6. Conclusions

The retention of knowledge is maximized when it is both heard and seen, and then expressed in one's own language through discussion and communication. The ultimate goal of language learning is also expression and communication. The findings of this study implies that in order to teach spoken English more effectively, teachers need to bring students into certain contexts, engage their multiple senses, combine audio-visual input, and try to create a relatively realistic language environment for students to immerse themselves in and understand spoken English conversations. English sitcoms are indispensable materials for creating multimodal situations and simulating communication, which allow students to both hear and see the learning materials. With globalization and the rapid development of technology, teachers and researchers need to further consider how they can more effectively use English audio and visual resources to improve classroom effectiveness.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

References

- [1] Zhou, G.; Niu, X. Approaches to language teaching and learning. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2015, 6(04), 798.
- [2] Zhang, F.; Yin, P. A Study of Pronunciation Problems of English Learners in China. *Asian social science*, 2009, 5(06), 141-146,
- [3] Jewitt, C. An introduction to multimodality. In Jewitt, C. (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*. London: Routledge, pp. 14-27. 2009.
- [4] Magnusson, P.; Godhe, A.L. Multimodality in Language Education--Implications for Teaching. *Designs for Learning*, 2019, 11(01), 127-137.
- [5] Leeuwen, T.V. Multimodality in education: Some Directions and Some Questions. *Tesol Quarterly*, 2015, 49(03), 582-589.
- [6] Jane, Sherman. *Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp.15-17.
- [7] Vetrie, M. Using Film to Increase Literacy Skills. *English Journal*, 2004, 93(03), 39-44 .
- [8] Cakir, Ismail. The Use of Video as an Audio-visual Material in Foreign Language Teaching Classroom. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 2006, 5(04), 67-72.



© 2023 by the author(s); licensee International Technology and Science Publications (ITS), this work for open access publication is under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0). (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)