

THE NEW CALL-BASED SET OF SHORT READING ACTIVITIES AT WWW.ENGLISH-TRAILERS.COM

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Abstract

One essential element for increasing comprehension in a second or foreign language is the building of target language vocabulary. Recently, a new CALL based set of reading activities at www.english-trailers.com has been created focusing on vocabulary retention centering on vocabulary found in movie trailers. One hundred vocabulary words, corresponding to ten movie trailers found at the site, were chosen. Each of the first 10 short readings introduces 10 new vocabulary words in addition to recycling words previously introduced. By the time students have completed the series of short readings, they will have been exposed to each word numerous times. After each reading, students are given a 2-part multiple-choice quiz. Students are quizzed on new vocabulary in the first part and previously introduced vocabulary in the second. Student scores are saved in a database in which the teacher can then access to monitor student progress. To further aid in long-term retention, students can listen to the 100 new words being used in a natural context in movie trailers found on www.english-trailers.com.

1 Introduction

Ideally, CALL activities should inspire and motivate students by providing them with a rewarding and productive experience (Bicknell, 1999). One way of doing so is to use a theme that students enjoy (Cummins, 1998). In fact, as demonstrated by Warschauer (1997), CALL-based activities increase participation and enjoyment in class, especially among so-called 'shy' students. Based on this idea, www.english-trailers.com was created to provide a fun way to study English using movie trailers. At the site, users can choose from a large selection of trailers and perform various activities based on them. Both a short summary and the full script are provided with difficult vocabulary highlighted in blue. When students move the mouse over one of these words, a pop-up with the definition and example sentence appear. Users can test their English by taking a cloze exercise and a grammar quiz based on English used in the trailer. At the web links section, students are encouraged to go to various sites on the Internet (such as Yahoo! Movies, the Internet Movie Base and the official movie sites of the trailers) in search of answers to questions provided concerning the movie and main actors.

The site is intended for both autonomous learners and students in the classroom. The site consists of two lists of trailers: non-graded and graded. When users enter the site, the list of non-graded trailers is shown and they are free to try as many as they desire. To use the graded trailers, one must first create a username. Once teachers have done so, they can add their class codes to the site. When students create their usernames, they should enter the class code provided by the teacher. Once they do so, both teacher and student will be able to monitor

their performance. Doing so will allow teachers to monitor student performance in the classroom while keeping student scores in a database to monitor how they are progressing.

One essential element for increasing comprehension in a second or foreign language is the building of target language vocabulary (Critchley, 1998). In recent years, CALL has demonstrated its potential for helping L2 students with this aspect of language learning (Loucky, 2004). In movie trailers, there are often recurring themes that tend to use similar vocabulary. For example, there are numerous trailers in the science/superhero, fairy tale, or romance genre that commonly recycle vocabulary. By studying trailers with shared vocabulary, these words are reinforced, and students can get a fuller understanding of their meaning. This method of repeating words has been proven to be a valuable technique in assisting L2 learners in fully retaining their meaning (Critchley, 1998; Ellis, 1995).

One advantage of L2 reading is that students can go at their own pace. If the meaning of a word is not clear, the student can look it up in the dictionary or spend a few moments to try to comprehend the meaning from context. However when students hear an unfamiliar vocabulary word during L2 listening, there is little or no time to try to figure out the meaning because the conversation keeps moving forward. One nice feature about using movies on the Internet through media such as QuickTime or RealPlayer is that students have control. They can pause or rewind to best suit their needs.

The English-Trailers site is continually attempting to grow. In October of 2004, the third version of the site was put on-line, adding increased functionality to the vocabulary, cloze, quiz and web link features. As the number of trailers available for students has grown, it was noticed that certain vocabulary commonly reoccur. To take advantage of this, new activities utilizing this fact are being designed to add to the site. This paper aims to describe the theory behind the design of a series of web-based reading activities created to increase long-term retention of target vocabulary.

2 Short Reading Activities

L2 learners gain confidence when they understand the words they hear (Shimo, 2002). As their L2 lexicon increases, the chance of sentence level and discourse level comprehension increase. As students have repeated exposure to vocabulary, the likelihood of remembering them increases. Based on this principle, a series of short half-page articles covering 100 vocabulary words from ten trailers found at www.english-trailers.com was created. Intended to be used in a teacher-led CALL class, students will be exposed to each of the 100 vocabulary two to four times by the time they have read all the articles. Clearly, the intent of this repetition is to ensure students can store the meaning of each word in their long-term memory, thus, allowing them to use it at a later date.

To insure that the vocabulary focus of the articles is the trailer-based words, a word frequency text profiler was used. The articles are written such that that vast majority of the text (excluding the vocabulary words) is in the top 2000 most frequently occurring English word list (Word Frequency, n.d.). This word list is based on the Brown corpus which reflects general non-academic English as used in magazines, newspapers and books, and was also demonstrated by Shillaw (1995), who found that students displayed a great increase in interest, motivation and peer checking when working from such lists.

The ten trailers were not haphazardly chosen. Currently the vocabulary database of www.english-trailers.com contains over 2000 words and expressions. The database also keeps track of how often words reoccur. Based on this information, ten trailers were selected because they contain shared vocabulary (although each trailer also contains unique vocabulary). The difficulty of the trailer was also a factor when selecting the ten trailers. Trailers on www.english-trailers.com are ranked *easy*, *medium* or *hard*. These were ranked based on the trailers' length, difficulty of vocabulary, content and use of slang expressions. No trailers from the difficulty level of *hard* were chosen. The ten trailers are shown in Table 1.

Order #	Trailer	Order #	Trailer
1	Amelie	6	Shrek
2	Dinosaur	7	Shrek 2
3	Shaolin Soccer	8	Ella Enchanted
4	Spiderman	9	The Village
5	Spiderman 2 (International Trailer)	10	Spirited Away

Table 1: The ten trailers selected

The articles are designed to be read in a particular order. In most cases, the first time a vocabulary word is introduced in a reading, contextual hints to the meaning are provided. In subsequent occurrences, fewer hints are provided. The first ten articles each correspond to a trailer. For example, the first article corresponds to the Amelie trailer. The article exposes the reader to all the difficult vocabulary to be found in the trailer. However the vocabulary found is not limited to that particular trailer. The first article also previews vocabulary to be found in other trailers. More than ten articles are provided to ensure that all words have sufficient recycled. Through repetition, long-term retention of the target vocabulary is reinforced; a technique outlined by Davis (1995).

After reading each article, students take a short two-part quiz. The first part checks vocabulary introduced for the first time. The second part aids long term retention by checking five random vocabulary that were introduced in a previous article. The quiz questions come in three multiple choice forms. The first two are vocabulary to definition matching and the third is fill-in-the-blank.

Listening to trailers can be a challenge for students not used to the pace at which native speakers talk. It is the intention of the authors to ease the transition from reading to listening. As vocabulary will first be recycled through the short readings and then again through listening to the trailers, students are provided with sufficient reinforcement to aid in long-term retention.

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