Chapter 13
Learning English in a Multidisciplinary Context: A Case Sample – The Independence of the United States Through Multimodal Texts

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ABSTRACT

John Adams is a biographical miniseries produced and broadcasted by the American satellite network HBO, which ran between March 16 and April 27, 2008. It illustrates the life of the United States’ second president, John Adams, from 1770 to his death in 1826. Some of the key scenes deal with the Tea Party of Boston, the process of independence and the signing of the Declaration. This series is a major example of how to use a media source to get the student involved in the lesson while acquiring skills and knowledge belonging to different areas. The development of the American Revolution (for history and geography), the ideals of Liberalism (for philosophy), and the early pamphlets and the Declaration of Independence itself (for literature) are some examples of how the student can get acquainted with a multidisciplinary learning process. The experience has shown how this miniseries helps the student to learn English while watching it (with or without subtitles, regarding the subject’s skills), and through several workshops afterwards.

INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition has become one of the main topics in Education, as well as a currently increasing business. From the first levels of primary instruction to graduate school, the development of linguistic skills is considered to be one of the primary goals of foreign language teaching. In words of Pastor Cesteros teaching and learning of foreign languages is perhaps the most influential area within Applied Linguistics since the central decades of the 20th century (2004). Within this wide field, the learning of English has become the most prominent issue, as it has progressively reached the status of lingua franca in commerce, higher education, science and technology, etc., so it is not strange to discover

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that large amount of practical cases and applied theories that have been published deal with the topic of the acquisition of English as a second language. In words of David Crystal (2003), English has become a “global language,” with all the advantages and dangers that category can ensue. According to his own definition, English would fulfill the next statement: “A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (Crystal, 2003, p. 3).

BACKGROUND

Throughout the last decades, multiple theories on how new languages are acquired have been developed, coming those from many different fields of knowledge. Many specific or general theories have been exposed in such different fields as Linguistics, Psychology, Pedagogy, Translation, etc. Scholars such as Roman Jakobson (with his writings from 1959 to 1980), David Crystal (2003), or Vivian Cook (2016), among many others, have worked on trying to explain this process. According to Alina Terekhova, “In general, at least three main generations of schools of thought in linguistics can be distinguished” (Terekhova, 2017, p. 12). She would latter develop this theory stating that these schools are Structuralism, Generative Linguistics, and Interlanguage. One of the main common thoughts on the field is that Literature is one of the principal sources to accomplish an effective language acquisition process. By the usage of abridged texts, bilingual editions, partial translations, students can get acquainted with a second language and the culture behind it. As Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater argue:

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\text{One of the main reasons might be that literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is ‘important’ in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues, and which is enduring rather than ephemeral. Its relevance moves with the passing of time, but seldom disappears completely. (Collie & Slater, 1994, p. 3)}\]

In our special case, as it will be proved, students do not only enlarge their knowledge in these areas, but also in the whole spectrum of “the Humanities.” In order to achieve this goal, professors have enriched the primary concept of “Literature” by adding a series of multimodal texts different from the traditional written ones. These different types of discourses have a double objective: on the one hand, they offer a wider vision of the concept or context that is tried to be explained and, on the other hand, these texts are (usually) more attractive to our concrete students, which also facilitates the second language teaching-learning dual process.

Ethnolinguistic and sociolinguistic have been a fruitful field of study since the theoretical production of Noam Chomsky was first developed in the central decades of the 20th century. The research on how languages vary in different contexts has helped to understand their evolution, but also how both they and human mind work, since the acquisition of an articulated language is closely related to the experience of knowledge. In the words of Lavandera “The context is ‘social’ in the sense that it encompasses the internal organization of a society, with its tensions, internal differences, subgroupings, and so on” (Lavandera, 1990, p. 9). On the other hand, these disciplines have also provoked the utilization of contexts in the language teaching-learning process, as they have been understood as central pieces of human communication.

In relation to these theories, the implementation of cultural contexts as a means to imbue the student a linguistic idea or concept has turned a key element in the teaching-learning process. There are many