

Sitcoms as a tool for cultural learning in the efl classroom

Los *sitcoms* como herramienta para el aprendizaje cultural en el aula de inglés

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RESUMEN

Con la llegada de la globalización y la consolidación definitiva del inglés como lengua internacional, el lugar de la cultura en el proceso de aprendizaje de esta lengua también ha cambiado. De este modo, focalizar la enseñanza en hechos culturales de países anglófonos resulta insuficiente en el mundo en el que vivimos, donde la amplia mayoría de las interacciones en inglés se producen entre hablantes no nativos. Desde un punto de vista culturalmente descentralizado (Holliday, 2009), el desarrollo de la competencia intercultural y la conciencia crítica deben constituir una parte esencial del aprendizaje de idiomas (Byram, 2014). Sin embargo, la mayoría de los libros de texto utilizados no promueven este aprendizaje (inter)cultural. En este trabajo, proponemos que la televisión sea un recurso pedagógico complementario para lograr este objetivo. Nos hemos centrado en “sitcoms” (comedias de situación) para elaborar una lista de episodios que pueden ser utilizados en el entorno de la Educación Superior para desarrollar esta competencia cultural. ■

ABSTRACT

With the emergence of globalization and English becoming a *lingua franca* for international communication, the place for culture in the language learning process has shifted as well. Thus, concentrating on cultural facts about English-speaking countries is insufficient for today's world, where the vast majority of interactions happen among non-native speakers. From a culturally decentered standpoint (Holliday, 2009), intercultural competence and critical awareness constitute an essential part of language learning (Byram, 2014). However, most ELT textbooks do not promote complete (inter) cultural learning. In this article, we argue that TV can be an additional pedagogical tool to help achieve this goal. We focus on sitcoms compiling a list of episodes that can be used at tertiary level to develop cultural competence. ■

PALABRAS CLAVE

Aprendizaje cultural, competencia intercultural, cultura visible, cultura invisible, televisión

KEYWORDS

Cultural learning, Intercultural competence, Big ‘c’, small ‘c’, television

1.- Introduction

Our world has been reshaped by globalization and technological advances. Baker (2012) explains that in the context of English language teaching (ELT), English functions as an international language or *lingua franca* (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2005). The *lingua franca* idea shows a culturally decentered perspective of English “built from the observation of communication between ‘non-native speakers’ in international settings” (Holliday, 2009, 152). Therefore, the goal of ELT has evolved as well, changing from a linguistic focus in the 1960’s to a communicative one in the 1970’s to finally adopt a focus on intercultural communicative competence. This is the ability “to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality” (Byram, Gribkova, & Starkey, 2002, 10). To develop this ability, cultural learning should be approached in the classroom. As TV shows are cultural products, we will discuss the value of sitcoms as an additional pedagogical resource to achieve cultural learning. In the second part of the article, we will offer some examples of episodes that can be used to enhance cultural learning. Following our own cultural content checklist, we will also suggest some of the cultural topics that the episodes show.

2.- Cultural dimension in language teaching

The concept of culture belongs to different fields of study and, as such, it is a very complex term to define. The most recurrent definition connects it to the idea of nationality, with the implicit danger of overgeneralization typically associated with national cultures (Holliday, 1999).

However, with the advent of globalization we have seen how national categories are increasingly blurred. Since the main interest of this paper is a pedagogical approach to culture in EFL (English as a Foreign Language), we adhere to Lustig and Koester’s definition of culture: “a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values and norms which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people” (1999, 30).

Weninger and Kiss (2015, 50) clarify the relationship between language and culture: “What most scholars agree on is that language and culture cannot be separated from one another even if they disagree

on how to determine what culture needs to be studied [...] or whether culture(s) can be monopolized or owned by any particular groups in a globalized world.”

These authors also state that cultural perception in foreign language teaching has evolved, identifying three recognizable periods (Weninger & Kiss, 2013). From 1950 to 1990, culture was seen as an item to be studied; as such, it is presented as plain facts about national cultures. In the 1990s, the emergence of the communicative approach in language teaching was a turning point for the conception of culture. The notion of cultural awareness is developed. Culture is not just visible facts (Big ‘C’ culture) but also beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions, that is, the internal culture (Hall, 1976) or culture with small ‘c’ (Tomalin & Stemplesky, 1993). Besides, the idea of teaching a target language culture is called into question since English is a global language (Prodromou, 1992). In relation to methodology, the advent of the intercultural approach (Byram, 1997) was a decisive milestone for ELT. The ultimate goal was to achieve intercultural competence, i.e., successful and effective communication with people from different cultures in different cultural settings. Thus, linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competence are not enough to promote intercultural communicative competence (ICC). ICC requires attitudes, knowledge, skills, learning to learn abilities and critical awareness. There have been further attempts at trying to conceptualize intercultural competence (for example, Chen, 2003; Gudykunst, 2004). As such, a definite model has not been put forward yet. However, most scholars agree that it should include three dimensions: affective, cognitive and behavioral (Chao, 2013).

Finally, with the turn of the century, culture is viewed as an intricate and transnational concept. The focus should be put on learners becoming politically conscious citizens (Byram, 2011). This trend echoes the development of twenty-first-century skills that is being promoted in education (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

3.- TV for language learning

The development of ICT, Internet, and digital devices has had a profound impact in our society. In this context, TV has undergone considerable changes, gaining cultural and social relevance (Gámiz-Sánchez & Romero-López, 2012). Cascajosa-Virino (2016) explains that this has been the result of a combination of socioeconomic, technological and aesthetic causes. Then, the digitalization of TV and the advent of TV platforms have not only radically changed traditional TV broadcast but also brought

together a new kind of TV shows that are closer than ever to higher art forms (Muñoz-Fernández, 2016).

According to Bednarek (2015, 432), TV shows are “popular cultural products”; they are consumed by large audiences that engage with their characters and stories (Gregori-Signes, 2017). As such, TV shows have attracted unparalleled attention, being the focus of ongoing academic research. Many of the studies adopt linguistic (Al-Surmi, 2012; Bednarek, 2015; Gregori-Signes, 2007; Quaglio, 2009), media (Schneeweis & Foss, 2017; Vázquez, 2016) or cultural perspectives (De Jongste, 2017; González-Alafita, Dávalos, & Gutiérrez, 2012). Even more, some works rely on a combination of disciplines: for example, Götz-Votteler and Krug (2011) adopt a linguistic and cultural standpoint.

In the field of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), TV shows have been widely used with pedagogical aims as we will see below.

3.1. Sitcoms

Situation comedies or sitcoms became a TV genre after an agitated transition from the radio (Marc, 2005) as the US networks wanted to use “popular comedic vaudeville names in regular formats and time slots” (Mills, 2004, 63). The success of *I love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957) was the starting point for the prevalence of sitcoms. Since the very beginning, the sitcom began to be standardized, and in the 1950s, the familiar conventions of this new cultural form were arranged. The traditional sitcom presents these features:

Table 1. Sitcom features

PRODUCTION	22' running time; filmed in front of a live (or simulated) studio audience; single stage and several fixed sets; laugh track; multi-camera set up
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE	a main plot and up to three other sub-plots; episode structured in two parts with cliffhanger before the commercial break; episodic; single problem-resolution
CONTENT	traditional; everyday situations; stereotypical characters with conflicting personalities
HUMOUR	classic (misunderstandings, surprise, slapstick, parody, etc.); running gags; catchphrases; visual gags

Thus, their narrative structure, content and standard production remained unaltered until *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998). *Seinfeld* carves the path to a new way of telling stories “through its refusal to conform to episodic norms of closure, resolution, and distinct story lines” (Mittell, 2006, 34). Thus, the turn of the century brings a revision of the traditional sitcom. With the appearance of cable TV and the new “reality TV”, there has been a development. Thus, Mills (2004) coined the term “comedy verité” in reference to the new hybrid of sitcom and docu-soap like *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003). The new sitcom breaks with many previous conventions (Bonaut-Iriarte & Grandío-Pérez, 2009):

- Deviates from the traditional narrative form: longer episodes from 22’ to 30’; disappearance of the laughter track; more varied and progressive content; inclusion of other genres and forms).
- Changes in the production: the single setting and multi-camera set up are abandoned; closer to documentary or cinema production.
- Changes in the construction of humor: classic jokes and catchphrases are left behind; humor is more subjective; importance of irony and subtext.

3.2. Use of sitcoms in EFL: a pedagogic point of view

Video or audiovisual material has been used in English Language Teaching (ELT) for more than 50 years. It brings real life closer and helps contextualize the learning process (Sherman, 2003). There are two main uses of video: instructional, especially created for teaching, and authentic video material, such as films or TV shows. This study focuses on the use of authentic material, i.e., material which is produced for and by native speakers without a primary educational aim (Abreus-González & Haro-Calero, 2019, 25). This type of material exposes learners to authentic dialogue and real-life interactions. In this way, TV shows present language “with much wider linguistic, paralinguistic and paragrammatic levels. [...] The language is ungraded and un-simplified and is spoken at a normal pace and in typical accents” (Yang & Fleming, 2013, 299). As for the choice of sitcoms over other types of TV shows, they have been favoured in our proposal for its short-running time and the closed nature of episodes, which allows the teacher to work with single episodes without spending much time providing context to students.

There is substantial research on the use of TV shows and sitcoms in ELT, although most studies are concerned mainly with the improvement of English proficiency. Thus, the use of TV shows is not only

associated with incidental vocabulary learning (Webb, 2010; D'Ydewalle & Van de Poel, 1999) but can also help with listening practice, the development of listening strategies, the improvement of fluency and the acquisition of pragmatic language among others (Al-Surmi, 2012; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Washburn, 2001). Bada and Okan (2000) explain that the motivation to learn increases with the use of television whereas Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) identify the motivational element in cultural products transmitted by the media. In addition, many studies look into the aid of subtitles or captioning when using TV as a pedagogical tool. Most of them seem to suggest that skills and linguistic competences are further boosted by the use of subtitles (Chiu, Hsieh, Lee, Chang, & Wang, 2012; D'Ydewalle & Van de Poel, 1999; Kuppens, 2010; Ghia, 2012; Vanderplank, 2010).

Nevertheless, we should not forget that culture is essential to language learning: "Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing" (Kramsch, 1993, 1). Then, "EFL learners [...] should be guided to develop cultural and linguistic awareness" (Chao, 2013, 248). In addition, TV series display the cultural values of a society (González-Alafita, Dávalos, & Gutiérrez, 2012). As such, TV shows and sitcoms are a window to cultural information and offer a natural context so that students are exposed to various cultures; with the instructor's guidance, they become "valuable exercises in interpreting cultural features and developing intercultural awareness" (Chao, 2013, 250). Therefore, from the pedagogical viewpoint, studies are also beginning to address the use of TV shows and sitcoms in relation to cultural learning. Yang and Fleming (2013) affirm that an intercultural competent speaker "is also competent at interpreting foreign cultural products (e.g., films and TV series), taking into account their cultural context" (297). Sitcoms "can be an effective platform for the language learners to be immersed in the culture or way of life of the target community" (Chang, 2015, 26). In that sense, Lee (2016) studied culture in *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-), González-Alafita, Dávalos and Gutiérrez (2012) analyzed cultural messages in *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-) in relation to Mexican values, Rucynski (2011) examined *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-) from a sociocultural teaching perspective; also, Larrea-Espinar and Raigón-Rodríguez (2012) discussed the American values portrayed in *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004).

Although sitcoms are a window to other cultures, mere exposure does not mean automatic learning. As such, the role of the teacher as advisor and educator is essential (Lee, 2017). The second part of this paper focuses on material selection, which is key to effective cultural learning.

4.- Suggested sitcom episodes for cultural learning

The second part of this paper gathers a list of sitcom episodes that can be used in the EFL classroom to provide students with specific opportunities for cultural learning. To that aim, we have used a content checklist to identify cultural categories and themes in sitcoms (Lee, 2009; Larrea-Espinar, 2015). In that way, we have been able to determine and classify the type of cultural content and the topics in the sample episodes presented in Table 2.

As we have previously mentioned, the closed nature of individual episodes makes sitcoms ideal for classroom projects. This list we have compiled does not intend to be exhaustive in nature, only a selection based on several criteria explained below.

Firstly, although any sitcom will provide students with an opportunity for language competence development, audience-based selection is key to enhance effectiveness. Thus, we have in mind an audience of young-adults (high school or university students mostly), both in formal and informal settings.

Secondly, when introducing a sitcom episode in the classroom for cultural learning, we have to ponder several constrictions such as interest, stereotype awareness, duration, topic or language complexity and specialization level.

Thus, some sitcoms have been excluded from the selection because:

- Even acknowledging the fictional nature of the product, some sitcoms show interactions that do not portray realistic interactions, thus not providing a window to reality and not being effective from a cultural viewpoint. Some examples of these are *The Office* (UK and US), *30 Rock*, *Community*, *Scrubs*, *Flight of the Conchords* and some animated series such as *The Simpsons*, *Futurama* or *Family Guy*.
- Episodes presenting continuous coarse language might not be appropriate. We do not intend to censor material for university students but shows such as *Fleabag* and *Insecure* might exemplify sitcoms whose profanity surpasses actual interactions. For this purpose, network television series (those which are broadcasted “over the air”) pose a lesser problem than OTT (“over the top”) or cable shows, which contain a greater amount of swearing and sexual-related contents. Similarly, *Silicon Valley* has been omitted both for this and for its highly specific vocabulary, which general students might find overwhelming.

- Individual episodes must provide opportunities for cultural understanding of small ‘c’ categories. Cultural behaviors and products are easier to perceive and more accessible without a previous selection, but it is the understanding of the beliefs and worldviews shared by a particular group what will allow students to develop interpreting and discovering skills.

Following this last criterion, we must emphasize that using sitcoms in the classroom gives us the advantage of focusing not only on culture-specific aspects (‘Big C’ and ‘small c’), but also, on culture-general features contributing to the actual development of knowledge, strategies and attitudes, as supported by Paige, Jorstad, Paulson, Klein and Colby (1999). Hence, we would be working on developing competences rather than only focusing on specific “cultures”.

Table 2. Sitcom episodes selection

NAME	EPISODE	CULTURAL TOPICS	DISTRIBUTION AND NETWORKS	RELEASE YEAR
1. Modern Family	S01E05 “Coal digger”	Big “C”: Ethnic groups, family, social customs, leisure/sports, food and non-verbal communication. Small “c”: Communication styles, nurture, confrontation, materialism and male-oriented values.	Network (ABC)	2019-
2. Master of None	S 0 2 E 0 3 “Religion”	Big “C”: Ethnic groups, music, food, ceremonies, social customs and family. Small “c”: Individualism vs. Collectivism, confrontation and rules-regulation oriented	OTT (Netflix)	2015-
3. Friends	S01E03 “The one with the thumb”	Big “C”: Urban life, food and social customs. Small “c”: Communication styles, individualism, materialism and competition.	Network (NBC)	1994-2004

NAME	EPISODE	CULTURAL TOPICS	DISTRIBUTION AND NETWORKS	RELEASE YEAR
4. Black-ish	S02E16 "Hope"	Big "C": Ethnic groups, politics, music, mass media and family. Small "c": Equality, fairness and nurture.	Network (ABC)	2014-
5. Seinfeld	S09E15 "The Wizard"	Big "C": Ethnic groups, politics, currency/shopping, social customs and films. Small "c": Competition, materialism and result-oriented.	Network (NBC)	1989-1998
6. The Big Bang Theory	S01E02 "The Big Bran Hypothesis"	Big "C": Customs, food, non-verbal communication, regional variations and housing. Small "c": Up-bringing and male-oriented values.	Network (CBS)	2007-
7. That 70's Show	S01E05 "Eric's Burger Job"	Big "C": History, music, education, dress-style and social customs. Small "c": Materialism, self-improvement and communication styles.	Network (FOX)	1998-2006
8. Episodes	S01E01	Big "C": Regional variations, mass media, ceremonies and non-verbal communication. Small "c": Materialism, confrontation, communication styles and result-oriented.	Network (BBC 2) Cable (Showtime)	2011-

NAME	EPISODE	CULTURAL TOPICS	DISTRIBUTION AND NETWORKS	RELEASE YEAR
9. Man with a Plan	S01E01 "Pilot"	Big "C": Family, education, social customs and housing. Small "c": Equality, nurture, male-oriented and fairness.	Network (CBS)	2016-
10. Superstore	S01E01 "Pilot"	Big "C": Shopping, holidays and social customs. Small "c": Materialism and communication styles.	Network (NBC)	2015-
11. Catastrophe	S03E02	Big "C": Regional variations, business, social customs, education and dress-style. Small "c": Communication styles, materialism and male-oriented values.	Network (Channel 4) OTT (Amazon)	2015-
12. How I met your Mother	S01E09 "Belly Full of Turkey"	Big "C": Regional variations, urban life, holidays, social customs, sports and family. Small "c": Fairness, self-improvement and nurturing	Network TV (CBS)	2005-2014

1. *Modern Family* might be classified as a "mockumentary" (fictional events are depicted and presented as a documentary). This episode provides plenty of portraits of different communication and confrontation styles. Materialistic values and a male-oriented society ("gold-digger", referring to a woman whose sole intention is to marry someone to obtain financial gain) play an important role. This episode has also some instances where we can find sexual innuendos.

2. *Master of None* is one of the most popular and influential sitcoms being broadcasted at the moment. In this particular example, the story focuses on the conflict between tradition and reality, between family values and social standards (this clash is essential to classic-sitcom structure, although, in the past,

traditional values were favored). The coming to terms of the main character is an excellent opportunity to work with certain issues in class.

3. *Friends* is one of the most successful American sitcoms of all time. The constant presence of food and its comforting role, American puritanism, importance of the individual and megalomania are key elements in this episode. This particular example was studied in depth and presented in Larrea-Espinar and Raigón-Rodríguez (2012).

4. *Black-ish* centers on the everyday life of an upper-middle-class African-American family. This episode deals with an incident of police brutality against African-Americans, its subsequent court decisions and reactions as part of the political movement “Black Lives Matter.” This is a very good example of how sitcoms nowadays are not restricted to a simplistic euphemistic view of reality.

5. *Seinfeld* is considered the TV show which changed the sitcom structure forever (Mittell, 2006), unarguably the most influential one ever made. Despite certain difficulty to use it in class, due to being shot 20 years ago, there are deep-rooted American values in each episode, a reflection of the American psyche. In this particular one, writers present interracial relations and the taboo they represent after years of open racism. Appearances and the ins and outs of politics are also intertwining plots.

6. *The Big Bang Theory*, even though based on stereotypical characters, is ideal for high school and higher education Science students. Specific vocabulary is one of the advantages for these types of students, although we can use it in regular classes as well. The example listed above can be used for both. In the show, cultural clash is one of the main sources of comedy, together with masculine values and “mansplaining”.

7. *That 70's Show* can be a very motivational watch for teenagers since the show portrays stories they can relate to. The show is contextualized in the 70's and the music is a very important part of their lives (you can listen to music by Peter Frampton and Cheap Trick in this case). In this particular episode, the main character has to interview for a part-time job and starts working at a fast food restaurant.

8. *Episodes* describes the life in LA of two television writers as compared to their old London lifestyle. Everything ends up falling through when the couple discovers that a dishonest Hollywood producer has not been completely sincere. American and British communication styles are very well depicted. This example allows enriching post-watching discussion on cultural clashes.

9. *Man with a Plan* presents a typical suburban American family. Roles are interchanged in childcare

after the mother decides to go back to work. The different interactions allow a glimpse into American deep-rooted beliefs, such as the reluctance to public services (“Free stuff isn’t that great”), stay-at-home dads perceived as emasculated, among other materialistic and male-oriented observations (“A punch in the nose can be a real problem solver”).

10. In the first scene of the episode of *Superstore*, we see it as the embodiment of the American dream, a Shangri-La where everyone’s needs and desires are met. Halfway into it, one of the main characters describes her job and how the year revolves around different sale seasons (back-to-school, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas...). Also, at the beginning of the episode, a job interview takes place and we can see the kind of people that work in these stores (handicapped, minorities, elderly baggers and a single mom-to-be). We are spectators to a shopping spree and a fake robbery that turns into a flash mob (“this is the fault of the internet”), which represents the constant influence of social media and consumerism in everyday life.

11. *Catastrophe* is based on the personal relationship of the two main characters, one of whom is American and the other Irish. The different cultural background is a constant source of cultural mishaps. Many of the topics in this episode are interesting in terms of cultural analysis. Taboos such as homosexuality and suicide are dealt with indirectly. This particular episode provides students with a wide range of accents (Irish, Scottish, RP and American). Interactions in the job interviews and at school are very valuable. The American obsession with personal hygiene and the main character’s sense of shame when hiding that his wife is a teacher are other significant cultural features related to a materialistic view.

12. *How I met your mother* is the most popular sitcom of the first fifteen years of this century. Again, the main characters are a group of friends living in Manhattan. Thanksgiving is an American traditional celebration that is recurring in sitcoms. Huge Thanksgiving dinners are portrayed throughout the whole episode. The two “Americas” are depicted: New York City and St. Cloud, Minnesota, a typical small town in the Midwest where everybody knows everybody, traditions are important and family values are upheld.

5.- Conclusion

The final goal of ELT is ‘no longer to achieve native speaker proficiency, but to build intercultural understanding and mediation through language learning’ (Corbett, 2003, 2).

Hence, cultural learning is essential. However, the cultural learning tends to be focused on superficial or ‘Big C’ aspects of culture (Lee, 2009; Byram, 2014). Thus, we propose using TV sitcoms as an additional cultural resource in the classroom. With the teacher’s guidance and careful selection, sitcoms can be effective and motivating pedagogical tools to enhance cultural learning. As such, we have compiled a list of sitcom episodes that can be used to broaden cultural competence and have identified the main cultural themes of each episode so that they can be interpreted and discussed in class. As teachers, our purpose is to contribute to the actual cultural teaching/learning practice. This list may serve as a first step towards developing a full thematic unit, which is already part of further research. As we have suggested, intercultural competence is not only necessary to reach effective communication in the foreign language, but also to develop intercultural awareness which, in turn, will train intercultural and critical citizens.

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