The Need for Optionality and Learning Guidance in Self-Access Audiovisual Language Learning Material

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Abstract

This research set out to evaluate video material contained within the English learning coursebook *English M1* which was designed for self-access use. *English M1* is a Brazilian government-sponsored piece of material available for free. It is the first stage of a course that learners would complete independently, unmediated by a teacher. The audiovisual material included a short narrative and two aspects of this were chosen for evaluation: the learners' perception of the language learning affordances of the episodes and how the story appealed to their interest. There is little research carried out on the post use of materials which draws on learners' reports about how they engaged with self-access material. Retrospective evaluations, however, can generate relevant and learner-based criteria for future materials design. This research used semi-structured interviews to gather data about how the learners engaged with the videos, their reasons for doing things in the way they did and their opinion about the plot. Key findings included that self-access materials must provide learners with guidance concerning the affordances of the material and how it could be used as well as optionality in what is delivered for increased chances of relevance and engagement. The article ends with recommendations for the design of video material in self-access materials.

Keywords: English learning materials, materials evaluation, materials development, audiovisual materials, self-access materials

Materials for learning English in the form of coursebooks have always been influential in the way people learn and teach English (Mishan & Timmis, 2015). Because of this, materials

should avoid inefficient pedagogies or practices that are likely to be demotivating. Evaluating materials based on learners' reported experience is potentially one of the best ways to ensure material's efficiency (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). This is because post-use materials evaluation can draw on contextual needs (that of the environment in which it was used) and generate research-based information about how materials should be designed (Graves, 2019; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). This kind of research, however, is scarce (Yamaguchi et al., 2019; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). There seems to be no retrospective evaluation of audiovisual materials, especially self-access materials, for low-level learners that drew on the ultimate end-users: the learners.

As such the present study aims to evaluate the audiovisual component of the material *English M1*. This audiovisual material comprises 18 short episodes of animated video about a character, Rosa, as she leaves her home country to study in the US, and experiences a new culture. The title of these video clips is 'All About You' (henceforth AAY). For this study, two aspects in AAY were chosen for evaluation: its English learning and learner engagement potentials. As one of the developers of this material, Mulling's awareness of how AAY was meant to impact learners is perceived as a methodological advantage when investigating the impact of a language learning material (McCullagh, 2015).

The following section reviews the literature that is directly pertinent to audiovisual materials. It begins with considerations about the content (themes) in language learning materials. It then discusses what is already known from the literature about how audiovisual materials can be designed to promote better comprehension and language learning. In the sequence, the article presents the data collected in the interviews which contain learners reported experience with AAY. It then discusses the impact of AAY on the learners and concludes with pedagogical implications for the design of self-access audiovisual materials for low-level learners and for the evaluation of language learning materials in general.

Topics and Themes in Language Learning Materials

Like any input that assumes the status of an instructional material, videos should avoid dull topics and bland ways of presenting potentially engaging content (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013; Leather, 2003). At the same time, designers are often constrained by the need to avoid potentially sensitive and controversial subjects (such as the so-called PARSNIP topics: Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, Isms and Pork) (Galloway, 2017; Thornbury, 2010; Akbari, 2008a, 2008b). Such constraints are not unreasonable. Materials reflect the views and values of a certain society; therefore, they should avoid stereotypes (such as oversimplification or distortion of information), inaccurate representations of the real world and contribute towards mutual understanding on a global level (Bao, 2016a, 2016b). Adequate cultural content is also a way of authenticating (through providing relevant information) and humanising (through raising socially relevant awareness) the learning experience, as opposed to making it only about the language system, or commodifying English, that is, valuing it only for the economic ascension it may bring to the individual and not also for the greater access to knowledge it might bring (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2014; Gray, 2010).

In consonance with this, critical pedagogy advocates for an English learning experience that embraces social transformations, particularly concerning awareness of the existing inequalities such as those experienced by marginalised groups (Banegas & Castro, 2016; Akbari, 2008a, 2008b; Canagarajah, 2005). Critical pedagogy considers it good practice to exploit the learners'

existing knowledge through promoting the discussion/learning of topics they can relate to; the focus on learners' values, conceptualisations and real-life concerns, their culture as well as other non-native English cultures. It is expected that language learning material would motivate learners to add a personal dimension to the interpretation of information; show open views about events in a way that no ideology is imposed; contain engaging and credible characters, that appear to be real in their appearances, behaviours, viewpoints and personalities, to name a few (Bao, 2016a, 2016b; Akbari, 2008a, 2008b).

Audiovisual Material for Language Learning

Overall, audiovisual materials are a potentially rich source of contextualised linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of language use (Bauer, 2014; Karakaş & Sarıçoban, 2012; South et al., 2008; Yanchar, 2005). Such richness of context provides both bottom-up affordances (such as the vocabulary used) and opportunities for top-down processing (such as applying background knowledge to help process a text). This is considered a rich context because learners need to be able to use both top-down and bottom-up processing when interacting in the L2 (Celce-Murcia, 2016).

Captions consist of L2 text on the screen which is identical to the L2 audio. Captioned audiovisual material has been particularly explored in its potential to enhance comprehension and vocabulary learning (Montero Perez et al., 2014; Montero Perez, Van Den Noortgate & Desmet, 2013). This is believed to be the case because captions provide speech stream segmentation (the breaking up of the flow of sound into meaningful units, such as noun phrases) and word boundaries (Bird & Williams, 2002; Chai & Erlam, 2008; Markham, 1999; Winke et al., 2010), which help learners process spoken and written words more easily, deeply and, as a consequence, become more engaged with video content (Sydorenko, 2010). Research using eye-tracking technology has shown that viewers automatically read the captions when watching captioned audiovisual input (Montero Perez et al., 2015; Winke et al., 2013). The benefits of captions, however, depend on a few conditions.

One of the conditions has to do with semantic match between on-screen imagery and aural input. For example, a paraphrase, where what has been spoken closely reflects the visuals, and vice-versa. This can lead to better learning of word meaning and hence, comprehension, particularly for beginner learners (Bianchi & Ciabattoni, 2008; Peters, Heynen & Puimège, 2016). Other conditions are attention-enhancing techniques and pre-watching activities that elicit viewers' background knowledge of both language and content. These have also been found to optimise the positive impact of captioned videos (Goldstein & Driver, 2015; Montero Perez et al., 2015; Vanderplank, 2016). A fourth condition is motivating learners to guess word meaning (based on the contextual clues) when watching captioned videos for the learning of word meaning to take place. Also, conditions such as watching videos twice (Montero Perez et al., 2014) and captions with glossed words where learners have the control over pace and gloss access (Hsieh, 2019; Montero Perez et al., 2018) have also been found to increase vocabulary knowledge and comprehension.

When designing audiovisual materials for language learning, considering learner and input level is another important condition for captioned audiovisual materials to benefit language learning. Using material above the learners' level may mean that captions are insufficient to support comprehension (Hsieh, 2019). For example, in Peters, Heynen and Puimège (2016), the experiments showed learners' vocabulary size positively correlated with the positive impact

of watching captioned videos on incidental learning of the form of the target item, form recall and learners' odds of correctly remembering word meaning. On the other hand, when learners' prior vocabulary knowledge was very low, learning either did not occur or only in a very limited way, and neither did they show signs of understanding the gist of the captioned audiovisual input. Danan (2004) and Vanderplank (2010) also found that vocabulary learning when watching captioned videos is dependent on input being at or below learners' proficiency. This is to say that either a minimum language competency or careful matching of competency level and linguistic difficulty are needed for captioning benefits to occur. This suggests that for low-level learners, authentic audiovisual materials might need some level of adaptation and simplification, such as the speech rate being slightly reduced, use of high-frequency words that are part of the previously encountered vocabulary, and some type of guidance inviting learners towards conscious attention to word meaning and pre-watching activities that elicit relevant content and support understanding.

Methodological Gap

This research aims at closing two gaps: a content-based gap and a methodological-based gap.

There are helpful research-based recommendations on how audiovisual materials should be designed in order to be relevant, promote engagement, comprehension and language learning. In teacher-led learning environments, the responsibility of ensuring these qualities and, for instance, avoiding cultural bias, generating a motivating learning environment and a sound pedagogy is ultimately placed on the teachers and (assuming they have the skills to do so) their sensitivity to select, adapt and/or supplement content in a context-responsive manner (Banegas, 2011; Banegas & Castro, 2016; Jeyaraj & Harland, 2014). This seems reasonable taking into account that teachers know their target audience and consequently are likely to succeed in creating contextualised improvements to what materials bring. However, in self-access materials (that is, not mediated by a teacher) for low-level learners (with limited L2 skills), designing engaging, socially relevant content that promotes language learning in the ways described above is different. Bearing this in mind, the questions guiding this study are:

1. How do low-level learners interact with self-access audiovisual materials when no guidance is provided?

2. What kind of support and alternatives should low-level learners receive when watching audiovisual materials for language learning on their own?

This research aims to provide insight into these issues.

In terms of methodology, this study also aims at addressing the lack of learner-based evaluations of materials. Evaluating materials can lead to important contributions towards materials development (Graves, 2019). However, previous methodological structures for evaluations have rarely addressed learners (Graves, 2019; McGrath, 2013; Mukundan & Ahour, 2010; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018), even in self-access materials (Hubbard, 2013, 2009; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018) where learners are the only end-users and likely to be the best ones to say how the material impacted their learning. There is legitimacy and relevance in running evaluations from the perspective of experts (teachers, material developers) based on, for instance, SLA criteria. However, it is questionable the extent to which they can voice learners' views (McCullagh, 2015). In the few studies where learners were addressed (Al-Busaidi & Tindle, 2010; Kelly & Baird, 2017; Pryor, 2010; Reinders & Lewis, 2006), learners'

opinions were mostly gathered through closed-answer questions, with no rich, qualitative data where they are given opportunity to comment on topics other than the ones pre-established by the researchers or have their opinions probed.

Research Purpose & Method

In order to help close this gap, this research investigates what the learners themselves have to say about their experience with the self-access audiovisual material AAY. The objective is to give voice to the actual users as important stakeholders in decisions about material design (Masuhara & Tomlinson, 2010). More specifically, this study provides an insight into how the self-instructed and low-level learners reacted to the audiovisual material, which learning strategies they used, what kind of knowledge they lacked to make better decisions when interacting with this material and what they thought about the content delivered. The following sections describe the methodological approach to gathering such information.

A qualitative study design was selected. The purpose of such a design was to delve into the specificities of learners' reported experiences such as the whys and hows of using AAY. A volunteer sampling technique (Cohen et al., 2018) was used in the study.

Context and Participants

Although a large number of potential participants was contacted, 316 in total, twenty-four participants volunteered to take part in the interviews. All participants (Brazilian Portuguese L1 speakers) who volunteered were accepted as the only criteria for recruitment was having used the material. Participants' previous English learning experience varied greatly in terms of length and mode (such as independent or teacher-led). All learners considered themselves at beginner level of English proficiency and opted for using this material (targeted at beginners), which was offered for free. Participants' age range varied from young adults (of about 18 years old) to middle-aged adults (of about 40 years old). Most participants were members of staff in vocational schools (such as Portuguese, Spanish and PE teachers and administrators). Some participants were students in these schools.

Data Collection

The ethics committee approval was received from the university where the study was carried out. All relevant procedures for research with participants were followed. This included signed consent forms and participant information sheets. Consent to carry out the study was also received from the gatekeepers, who were responsible for the development and distribution of the material *English M1*.

Potential participants were contacted by email and those who agreed to meet for the interviews were given a time table to select a time/day that was appropriate for them. Because this study values learners' opinions as the most important source of evaluation of self-access learning materials, data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews as these allow for contextualization of respondents' answers, flexibility to follow up on their comments and probing their answers (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

During the interviews, participants were prompted with the audiovisual material AAY on a computer screen for aided recall (Lavrakas, 2008). In general, the interview followed a hierarchical focusing strategy (P. Tomlinson, 1989), that is, it started with more general questions and continued with more specific ones, to probe for the underlying reasons for

individuals' unique approach to the material and their consequent experience. Participants were asked about whether they had watched the episodes, why they watched it, how they watched it (such as whether they watched more than once or paused) and why they watched it in the way they did. Interviews were conducted in the participants' and Mulling's own language which increased participants' chances of expressing themselves accurately and researchers' accurate understanding of what the participants were saying (Stillwell et al., 2010). Interviews lasted about half an hour.

Data Analysis

Interviews were recorded and the qualitative data collected was analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo for efficiency in the organization and display of data selection and analysis. Because of the nature of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, the interview framework was precoded, so the content of the interviews was partly assigned at the moment the questions were designed. The predefined codes were later modified, adjusted, or new codes created in response to the data collected (as recommended by Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The weight of evidence lies in the recurrence of themes (opinions, experiences, and approaches reported by participants) as they crop up repeatedly and from more than one source (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, the data analyzed followed a systematic description of patterns and trends (codes and categories). Coded data were obtained primarily from categories formed by grouping similar ideas. The last step of coding provided core themes to interpret the data, as discussed in the results.

The Audiovisual Material AAY

English M1 is a government-sponsored piece of material and was available for free. It was designed as the first stage of a course that learners would complete independently, unmediated by a teacher. It comprised many of the traditional course book strands, such as grammar and vocabulary activities as well we reading and listening material. The listening component was largely delivered through the audiovisual material AAY.

When using *English M1,* Learners could choose to submit assignments for evaluation of their progress (which would allow them to receive a certificate) or just use the material at their own pace, as they pleased, without having any kind of evaluation (in this case, no certificate would be provided).

AAY is a sequenced and animated drama of 18 episodes to be watched weekly. Each episode lasts about 2 minutes and contains English captions. The videos can be paused, but there are no control buttons for the speed rate. There is no pre, while, or after-watching activity or any type of guidance on how to watch. AAY was designed to trigger learners' interest in the material and (assumedly) sustain their motivation as a result of wanting to know the development of the story. It was also expected that designing AAY without any viewing-related task would promote a viewing experience closer to that of watching feature series when the focus is on the meaning of what is being conveyed, and not on the language used, in this way, innovating the use of audiovisual material in language learning environments. This outcome was highly dependent on learners liking the episodes in a way that is similar to what is experienced when one watches his/her favorite series on, for instance, Netflix.

The storyline is built around a Brazilian character, Rosa, who moved to Chicago to attend university. Rosa is portrayed as always content, friendly and talkative. From the beginning, she adapted easily to her life in Chicago and made new, local friends. Cultural or language barriers between Rosa and the people she interacts with are not present. An important thread in the plot is the unstable romantic relationship between the characters Dube and Christine. Other characters are Carly and Billy. Carly finds Billy annoying mostly because of his British accent. However, towards the end of the narrative they start dating. All characters look either slim or strong. They are all young adults and the situations portray events such as going to the pub with friends, going shopping for clothes and food, or going to university.

These themes were chosen because the authors of the material had reasons to assume that most of the users of this material would be young adults and therefore would relate to these situations and engage with AAY on a personal level. Besides that, as this material was produced for a specific (Brazilian) market, there was some flexibility in terms of content. Dating and going to the pub were considered safe inclusions, whereas a more global product would have had to consider the appropriateness of their inclusion more carefully.

Although there is a sequenced thread linking the episodes, they mainly focus on the specificities of the scenario they take place in. For example, in Episode 8 What's in the fridge? Rosa and Carly make a grocery list. Then, Rosa appears in the supermarket with Dube. They buy things whilst expressing food names and quantities. This language content is directly related to the corresponding unit. In this episode, the only development of the storyline is Dube telling Rosa he is going to propose to Christine.

A group of Canadian teachers, in partnership with the project, volunteered to be the voice actors for the characters in AAY. Coincidently, there was a Brazilian on their team, so she recorded Rosa's lines. The voice actors did not receive any instructions concerning how they should interpret the lines (such as long pauses, and reduced speech rate) so the actors had no 'direction' as such.

Even though it was aimed at not heavily grading the lines, this was done intuitively and not always achieved. Some situations use functional language and attempt to present some naturalistic features of everyday speech and contain more realistic lines. For instance, see the captions in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Rosa and Carly at the pub: naturalistic lines

In other situations, however, the word choices or the syntactical constructions have a clear pedagogical purpose, the lines are less natural, not very realistic and contain excessive use of target vocabulary. For example, Rosa describes her sister as "(...) not very tall. She's medium height, really. I'd say she's slender. She has brown eyes and shoulder length wavy dark brown hair". The description contains many adjectives deliberately chosen to exemplify the target content (adjective order).

Results

This section presents the main themes that emerged in the analysis of the data collected.

The Importance of Plot

Twelve out of twenty-four participants said that the plot was *one* of the reasons why they felt motivated to watch AAY. For instance, P06 said that she was curious about what the characters were saying. P13 and P17 considered the story in AAY a "more pleasant" opportunity for learning English than the unit itself. P13 said that the story in the episodes made learning the (target) language easier than the rest of the material. P21 identified the episodes as a source of contextualized use of the target language. They "always" increased her motivation because they provided language in use. She highlighted the fact that the episodes contained a more segmented use of language. P19 said that in general "audio and video" are intrinsically "captivating", referring to the input-rich nature of videos. She did not seem particularly fond of the story itself, but she mostly recognised the richness of watching a video as opposed to just reading or listening to a text. P10 said that finding out what was going to happen in the story was motivating and despite not having much time, he always "felt like watching". He was the only learner who believed to have watched all episodes. P11 said that she felt curious to know what was going to happen in the next episode, but still, she did not watch all episodes.

A Language Learning Exercise

Fourteen out of twenty-four participants said that they only watched AAY occasionally. The reasons had to do with lack of time and technical issues (such as a bad Internet connection).

The main reason, however, was learners' perception that the episodes would not significantly lead to learning. This perception was triggered by the fact that there was no information guiding on what to do, how to watch or which learning strategies could be used. They repeatedly expressed that the episodes were there for them to learn the language being used in the dialogues, but they were not sure how exactly they would learn this language. Their reports evidenced that having received no guidance, the only thing left for them to do was "just watching". However, "just watching" would not make a huge difference to learning and this negatively impacted their interest in the episodes.

These fourteen interviewees also spoke that when they watched the episodes it was not because of the story itself, but for learning purposes. This shows that although their perception of learning was not high enough to motivate them to watch all or most episodes, there was some hope that they would learn something if watching it. For example, P02 skipped episodes and was not aware of what was going on in the story line. P08 only watched AAY when she had the time or for pronunciation practice, otherwise, she knew she could "carry on without watching". P09 explained that she randomly watched the episodes, depending on the time she had available, and that she did not focus on the storyline as she was watching it mainly to be exposed to the language. P22 explained that she was not curious about what was going to happen next in the story, like when "watching a soap opera or reading a book". P25 did not follow the episodes as a sequence because he rarely focused on the storyline when watching, which suggests he focused on the language (structure and vocabulary).

Captions – Case 1

P20 considered the language in the episodes "difficult". He said that the difficulty pushed him towards studying in order to be able to understand the language being used. P20 commented that adding Portuguese captions would be a solution to allow comprehension. However, he immediately reconsidered his suggestion explaining that Portuguese captions were a bad idea as they would hinder learning as opposed to enhancing it. For him, comprehension of the plot needed to occur through English because only this process would lead to learning, obviously his primary reason for even watching. He seemed very opposed to the use of his L1 and a supporter of immersive environments where only the target language is allowed. This learner had already studied other subjects on his own and used other types of self-learning, but that was the first time he was studying English on his own. He reported that he was expecting the learning process to be easier than it actually was. Because the language used in the video (and therefore in the captions) was above his level and, as research shows to be the case, he could not process it successfully. Not surprisingly, as a result he watched very few episodes.

Perceived Difficulty – Case 2

P15 said that the episodes were so difficult to understand that he was not in a position to judge the story. He said he paused the videos, typed in the captions on Google Translate, and read the translation. Not surprisingly, he found this time-consuming and stopped watching. When asked to comment on whether translating made AAY more engaging, he said that he could no longer comment on the episodes given how little he had watched them. This learner seems to have tried watching very few times (perhaps only once). He built a case to say that other people he knew who had used the material thought the same about the episodes. He said "for me, a low-level learner", suggesting that the videos were not appropriate for low-level learners and not watching was therefore not his fault. More guidance on listening processes, for example,

'*listen more than once*' and '*don't worry if you do not understand every word*' may have helped this learner.

Language Learning Strategies Used by the Learners

Participants' number one reason for watching the episodes was language learning. Two learning strategies were used. Learners used the intralingual captions for (1) vocabulary learning through the translation of the lines and/or words and (2) for pronunciation practice through paying attention to the sound and corresponding written form.

For example, a few learners (P06, P09, P12, P15, P16, P17, and P19) expressed that the captions facilitated the process of translation because they could pause, copy the words into Google Translate or translate mentally. Mental translation, in the way participants, referred to it, consists of pausing a scene to search for one or more words in the captions, but not the entire sentence, just enough to comprehend the idea without making any notes. Those who reported having paused and searched for translation were content with their approach.

Another learning strategy participants (P02, P04, P06, P07, P08, P10, P11, P12, P19, P23, P26) referred to was pronunciation practice. They did this in two slightly different ways. Some would sometimes pay attention to (but not voice) the way the characters were speaking at the same time that they were reading the captions, which means there was conscious attention to word sound and form. Although to a lesser extent, reports also showed that there was out loud repetition. For instance, P10 and P26 are used to repeat the lines/phrases imitating the characters.

Grapheme and Phoneme Correspondence

Particularly interested in learning pronunciation as a result of watching AAY, P26, an L2 Spanish teacher, differed from the other learners in the strategy used when watching the episodes. She wanted to "capture the exact sound of each letter". She explained she would raise hypotheses on what the sound of the letters should be based on the sound of these letters in other words, but she ended up concluding that English pronunciation was very difficult because the sounds were not always the same. P26 explicitly asked about the sound that a particular letter combination represented.

P26 drew on her experience as a Spanish teacher. Spanish is a shallow orthographic language (Portuguese, her L1, too). This means that there is a regular correspondence between sound and letter. Differently, English has a deep orthography. It is not a phonetic language. It is difficult to pronounce English words just by looking at them because the same sequence of letters will not always have the same sound. Although P26's strategy is efficient in Spanish (and would also work in Portuguese), it does not work for English, which explains why despite her effort, learning pronunciation was "very difficult". P26 said that she watched more than once (sometimes three times) because she wanted to improve her pronunciation. Despite the huge effort she put in to learn, P26 was not using the best learning strategy available because she did not know it.

Identification with a character

Data analysis revealed an interesting pattern regarding eight participants (out of twenty-four) who made positive references to Rosa and studying abroad and the other sixteen who made no reference to these two aspects. Considering their age and what can be loosely termed 'life

status', seven of these eight participants are young adults, except for P10 who is middle-aged. Studying abroad–the most defining characteristic about Rosa–is something plausible/achievable within these participants' reality. Their reports showed that they consider it something that could happen to them or other learners like them. Although P10 differs from the other seven in terms of age, his comments showed that he considers studying abroad plausible too: he said that traveling and speaking in English in the USA (more than in other countries) is something particularly attractive to him and his son. He explained that he had already been to California, which was very significant to him, and his son's dream is to study in Canada. It seems that Rosa studying abroad particularly appealed to him because it reminded him of a previous and positive experience and, at the same time, represented something that his son would like to do. To these eight learners, Rosa represented an achievable and desirable future state.

All other sixteen participants constitute a different pattern and a slightly different demographic (there is one exception though). They are middle-aged (the one exception is a young adult) and, throughout the interview, they made no reference to Rosa or studying abroad as something appealing to them. Amongst these sixteen participants, twelve work full-time at vocational schools. They have good payment rates and work conditions. These twelve participants are likely to be happy about their economic and social status. Four of these sixteen participants also referred to children and/or a partner throughout the interview. This 'life status' may impact one's willingness or possibility to spend time abroad. P23 (who is married and has children) explicitly said "I don't envisage this [living in the USA] in my future, I like it here, I don't see myself in another place".

Different from these sixteen middle-aged participants (again, P12 is an exception in terms of age) but, as it seems, similar to the first eight young adults (also P10 is the exception because of age), Rosa is in a moment of her life that allows a lot of freedom. No kids, no partner, no (well-paid, stable) job means she does not have much to lose or to consider before moving abroad. Based on the emergence of these two patterns, it seems reasonable to say that life commitments, a combination of career, family status, and age, of the fifteen middle-aged participants, made it unlikely that they would relate to Rosa or studying abroad as something desirable and achievable. Some of these fifteen participants (P04, P05, P08, P15, P19, P21, P24, P25) actually referred to going abroad as tourists as something they would like to do, which is reasonable since this is something that can be accommodated within the commitments of their "life status".

Not only the middle-aged participants showed no signs of identifying with Rosa (even though she was the only Brazilian in the story), three of them brought to light the absence of middle-aged characters in AAY. P05 said that the story did not appeal to his interest because, amongst other reasons, it was "for teenagers". P21 suggested that the situations should also have portrayed older characters and P22 felt as if the story had been designed for young adults only.

Discussion

The reports showed that a learning agenda was often present and intrinsically related to learners' interest in the storyline. This is evidence that these participants were able to identify that language used in context is helpful for learning, which is supported by the literature (Celce-Murcia, 2016). This suggests that these learners value exposure to the target language in a contextualised, quasi-realistic manner, rather than a fragmented way. For materials

development, this indicates learners might prefer to move away from structural content where language is learned as grammatical structures into which single words are slotted and actually deal with language in use, with larger components of meaning. In learning environments in general (such as teacher-led environments or self-access materials design) this can be met through Extensive Reading (Jeon & Day, 2016) or extensive viewing approaches which have proved to promote meaningful, comprehensible and contextualised input processing experiences (Renandya, 2017). The efficiency of Extensive reading has been noted particularly with adult learners in L2 environments (which is the case of the participants in this study) who are aware of the language learning and reading development gains that may result from Extensive Reading (Jeon and Day, 2016). It seems safe to say that the same applies to extensive viewing of videos. Because of the limited scope of this article, we will not discuss the principles guiding Extensive Reading experiences, but more on that can be found in Day and Bamford (2002).

The reports also showed that the storyline in the episodes promoted a modest level of engagement. In light of this result, a few things must be considered. It is hard to make viewing in a language learning material a genuinely enjoyable experience (as when watching on Netflix, for instance). This is only emphasized by the fact that AAY is material for learners at a low level of proficiency. This stresses that language learning materials should not be disguised as "elements that promote fun". Materials should primarily aim at promoting learning efficiently and effectively. As identified in the interviews, learning was actually the primary goal for the adult learners who participated in this study when exposing their reasons for watching AAY. Having this objective as the core is important because it shows material developers should focus on making informed choices in regard to the learning affordances of any piece of language learning material, even when it is meant to be a more entertaining component of a larger material. Undeniably there is a need to meet certain aesthetic criteria in order to ensure that the materials are attractive and therefore competitive in the market, which is important to bear in mind especially when designing materials for sale. However, there should be no confusion in terms of where compromises should be made and that should not be on the learning affordances. The contribution that the material can make to language development should be made clear. Prioritizing the language learning affordances of AAY (as opposed to the entertainment it promotes) would only align the materials to what learners expect of it.

Another hindrance to learners enjoying the plot had to do with the young-oriented nature of the events. AAY was indeed designed to cater to young adult learners wanting to study abroad, hence why Rosa (a young Brazilian studying at university). This study shows that content designed to appeal to young adult learners is unlikely to engage middle-aged adult learners. This is evidence that young and middle-aged learners tend to represent two distinct profiles that must be catered for in a specific manner in terms of content appeal. While middle-aged learners were able to, to some extent, see the language learning potential of AAY, there was nothing in the narrative to which they could relate. Although self-access learners of all ages expect learning to be the outcome of spending time using a language learning material, material designers must still cater to learners' interests in terms of topic relevance because a lack of interest in the content will also affect how learners engage and consequently learn from a given material.

One might question learners' actual interest in using this material which was offered to them for free. Besides that, it is known that learners tend to poorly manage the use of self-access

materials because of time constraints (Associação Brasileira de Educação a distância [ABED], 2016, 2013). The participants in this study were not expected to show evidence of their learning progress. Naturally, not being under pressure (for lack of a better way of putting it) to learn is another aspect that might have diminished engagement. One could assume that learners were simply not interested regardless of the quality of the material. However, the data showed that most learners were proactive in trying to learn through employing their learning strategies.

For instance, they accessed word meaning in their L1. This might have impacted learners positively because of the extended and conscious attention given to a specific word (or words), leading to better form recognition (particularly in the case of those few learners who typed in the words) and word meaning recall (Montero Perez et al., 2018). Since learners' primary motivation to watch AAY had to do with learning English, translating probably increased their perception of learning efficiency which consequently fed into their motivation to watch the episodes (as also found in Mills et al., 2004). Another example was paying attention to word sound for pronunciation purposes. Captions can indeed assist speech learning by indicating which words are being spoken (Mitterer & McQueen, 2009) at the same time that form-sound and sound-meaning links are made (Teng, 2019a, 2019b, 2018).

The fact that some learners sometimes used the play/pause button, sometimes copied the captions (single words or larger chunks) into Google Translate, sometimes paid attention to the word meaning and word-form correspondences (as a result of translating), and sometimes paid attention to the contextual clues that the images and larger syntactic structures promote is likely to have led to some level of vocabulary learning (Hsieh, 2019; Laufer & Girsai, 2008). As a deep orthographic language, it is a good thing that some learners paid attention to the pronunciation of the words, simultaneously listening and reading as a way of learning how to pronounce them. Coordinating visual (captions) and auditory domains assists speech learning and reinforces form-sound and form-meaning links (Teng, 2019a, 2018; Mitterer & McQueen, 2009).

However, despite the potentially helpful strategies learners employed, data showed that these were used intuitively and not consistently Learners did not know for sure how or why exactly to use these strategies. Sometimes, the wrong strategies were used. The benefits of watching captioned videos for vocabulary acquisition have been linked with viewing-enhancing techniques (Montero Perez et al., 2018; Vanderplank, 2016) and activation of background knowledge (Teng, 2018; Vanderplank, 2010), but as this study showed, learners did not know about it. They were not provided with these opportunities in any way. It is unlikely that the learning that resulted from the strategies the learners used and the way they used (meaning search and pronunciation) moved much further beyond form and meaning recognition to a stage where they can use the words for communication (Teng, 2018; Vanderplank, 2016; Nation, 2001). Although learners' intention was deliberate, they lacked the best learning strategies and clarity on what to do and when according to their needs and purposes.

In the classroom, the teacher can usually sense when a learner cannot understand and scaffold the content (providing visual support, resorting to the L1, showing encouragement). For example, in the case of the participant who is a Spanish teacher, in a classroom learning environment, an English teacher would probably identify this approach (trying to memore the sound of each phoneme). The teacher would probably have informed this learner that in English it is not always possible to transfer the sound of a letter in a word to another word and provide

examples of homophones or homographs. However, to state the obvious, this is not the case in self-access environments. Self-access materials need to provide learning strategies for learners to minimally overcome their difficulties on their own. This is evidence that self-access learners require clear learning-related instructions in the form of guidance on how and what to do with the material that is made available for them.

Another interesting information that resulted from the data was participants' interest in learning pronunciation through watching AAY, even though this was a self-learning experience. A plausible explanation for the importance given to pronunciation is the few opportunities for output production (a natural limitation of self-access materials) which seems to be minimized by learners paying attention to the sound of the words they listen to and read. Taking into account the low-level of the participants in this study, this particular interest in pronunciation development might be particularly true in low levels, but further research is needed to answer this assumption. Nonetheless, this stresses the relevance of designing audiovisual material that contains a component of pronunciation skills development.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Designing highly engaging materials, at appropriate levels of cognitive and linguistic difficulty for low-level learners requires careful thinking. Narratives with multi-dimensional characters are much more difficult to design under circumstances of limited aesthetic freedom such as language scripted to serve pedagogical purposes and graded to the level of learners, and untrained voice actors, to name a few. In part, this explains why the learners in this study were not particularly interested in the story and one would not have to go through the laborious process of interviewing learners to know this. Analysis of the data, however, revealed other reasons why the learners did not engage with AAY.

The first finding derived from this research has to do with participants' age. Rosa and studying abroad resonated only with the young-adult participants. The ideal L2 self-theory (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) helps understand why this aspect of Rosa's life did not seem relevant to the middle-aged ones. Generally speaking, young adults are in a moment of life in which they do not yet have significant family and work commitments. In this sense, studying abroad as Rosa did was within what they could consider achievable and desirable. To these learners, Rosa represented a plausible future ideal self. On the other hand, for the middle-aged learners, who, in the majority, already had significant family and work commitments, studying abroad was neither relevant nor likely achievable, hindering the chances that this aspect about Rosa would represent a plausible future self.

Whilst Rosa seems to have motivated some level of engagement with the videos for the young adults, for the middle-aged learners she did not. When it comes to content-relevant materials, these findings point to the need for a more nuanced divide than simply for 'adults'. When designing language learning materials, specifically catering to young adults and middle-aged adults is needed for increased chances of engagement. This recommendation is not made lightly. It is acknowledged that from a publisher's perspective, this division might diminish the potential market of any given piece of material. Profitability is understandably often the reason why material writers need to compromise between pedagogy and selling appeal. At the same time, engagement is a feature of successful materials and an obvious reason why materials would sell more effectively, which makes the young and middle-aged adult distinction an important contribution to the field of materials development.

A second finding is now put forward. It is related to what low-level and self-instructed English learners need to know when provided with audiovisual materials for "watching only", that is, when there is no activity related to it. Learners need to be informed that "watching for the gist" is a valid approach even in a learning environment. In self-access materials, when delivering audiovisual input (or any input for that matter), learners need to be explicitly told to watch for general comprehension (if that is the reason why the input was designed). Although the benefits of watching for actual communication is something that Masuhara (2013) and Watkins (2018) had already argued for, their arguments relate to materials being used in the classroom. Meaning-focused reading is necessary in self-access materials too. However, whereas in the classroom learners might read because the teacher is telling them to do so, in self-access learners should be provided with a rationale as to why "just reading" is a valid approach.

The third finding has to do with the self-access nature of the material investigated in this study. Teachers in the classroom can provide the specific help learners need based on evidence of what is needed and when, such as explanation on how to learn something. However, in self-access materials, human support is not always possible. Indeed, self-access material developers can design (a lot of) activities that might help learners prepare to watch something. For instance, pre-teach key vocabulary, elicit background knowledge in regards to the theme, and ask learners to study a few things. But learners' actual learning difficulties cannot be anticipated. At the same time, if self-access materials overstudy the input and over-prepare the learners to process it, they defeat the purpose in a way. If learners have to be so prepared for doing something (like watching a video), other important aspects would be missed such as the authenticity of the task, or the purpose of engaging with content. This suggests that similar to extensive reading where the level is carefully graded, texts are longer and frequent and can be processed fairly easily, "extensive viewing" that can be easily processed is also a good choice when designing self-access audiovisual material for low-level learners.

A fourth finding in this study has to do with the feedback. Although the importance of feedback in language learning is nothing new (Cooker, 2010), data analyzed suggested that feedback, loosely termed here as "a component of learner training" in self-access materials for low-level learners must cover a variety of possible scenarios which learners can choose from based on what they consider to be needed as a result of their actual experience. This has nothing to do with automated feedback that indicates whether an answer is right or wrong. This is about rationale and optionality because each learner will respond to the input available in a way and with a particular purpose (for instance, translating for enhanced comprehension, translating for vocabulary learning, or paying attention to the sound of words for pronunciation practice). Hence the need to deliver options and guidance on how to engage with the audiovisual material.

Who Would Benefit from This Study and How?

Independent researchers, publishing companies or teachers running evaluations of the materials they produce for classroom use can draw on the methodology employed in this study, which has been underused in past work. (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018; McGrath, 2013; Mukundan & Ahour, 2010), even in the evaluation of self-access materials (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018; Hubbard, 2013, 2009). This study showed that evaluating materials from the perspective of the end-users, through semi-structured interviews, tailored to each interviewees' responses, with plenty of opportunities for them to speak and have their opinions' probed assured richness of the data obtained and meant that what stood out are learner-relevant criteria.

It is acknowledged that publishing companies are unlikely to run post-use evaluations like this because of how time and finance consuming they would be (Amrani, 2011). However, there are many private language institutes and it has become more and more popular for them to produce their own in-house titles and abandon mainstream coursebooks designed by international publishers (Barros, 2018). These institutes have access to the designers of their materials and the learners who use these materials. This scenario represents a particularly advantageous opportunity for improving home-made materials through evaluations that are based on learner feedback.

Also, classroom teachers can consider the substantial findings in this study when it comes to designing homework activities as well as finding out the impact of these activities on the learners. Homework activities are self-access materials in the sense that learners are on their own at the moment when they are engaging with the material. Teachers cannot know for sure how learners use the homework activities unless they ask the learners. In this sense, teachers would benefit from directly addressing learners about how they engaged with their homework as this would reveal in what areas and ways learners need support in order to gain maximum benefit. This would help teachers not only for professional development, as they would be able to design better homework activities, but also, to identify and tackle precisely the type of learning strategies learners should be taught for those moments when they are on their own.

Ideas for the Development of Self-access Materials for Low-level Learners

This section contains a few examples of how to apply the pedagogical implications that emerged from the findings of this study. These recommendations can be considered by material designers who are elaborating materials for independent use as well as teachers in the classroom designing homework activities. Learners can be provided with alternatives in case they find the audiovisual material (or texts and audio) is not appropriate to their level. For instance, for those learners who consider comprehension too difficult, a few strategies are recommended:

- Read a summary of the input in the L1 for an overall idea of what it is about before watching it in English with English captions.
- Read the script (captions) first and then watch the video.
- Invite learners to study a list of keywords, their meaning, and pronunciation, and then return to the video.
- Watch the video without any text on the screen and explore the aural and visual information only before watching it with captions.
- Watch the video at reduced speed, before watching again at normal speed.
- As a way of educating learners on what it means to know a word (that is, it is more than just knowing a direct equivalent in one's L1), self-access learning materials should deliver vocabulary learning strategies that draw on different aspects of knowing a word, such as form recognition, meaning retrieval, collocational patterns and pronunciation.

For those learners who consider the input insufficiently challenging, language learning strategies can be recommended for them to choose from based on their interests:

- For improving spelling accuracy, learners should first watch videos with captions with keywords only and then watch them again with full captions.
- Learners could watch the video one time and then select a character. They pause the video before 'their' character speaks and try to supply the next line, before comparing it to the original.

These strategies are probably quite common in classrooms, where teachers mediate input, but need to be made explicit in self-study environments.

A Shortcoming in This Study

One limitation of this study is the fact that in volunteer sampling there is always the possibility that the respondents do not accurately reflect the population. This is because the individuals who choose to participate in interviews might have a more positive attitude to the material than those who chose not. This profile may not represent many of the self-instructed learners who often find it difficult to have the discipline to study on their own. We gathered 24 responses from a much larger cohort of students using this material. This could be for various reasons, with one of them being that the survey took place some time after many of the learners had used the material and this might reasonably be expected to have reduced the number of responses received. However, the response rate may also reflect a flaw in the concept of "self-access" because for "self-access" to be successful it may require instrumental motivational forces, such as an out-of-class assignment, to sustain learner motivation and engagement. There could be many reasons why learners did not want to participate in the interview, but one clear possibility is that many of the students lacked the needed self-discipline for self-regulated learning that is required to access the material regularly given the competition with other priorities and the lack of someone in an instructor role to push them to continue studying. For these reasons, future materials evaluations could look to investigate more deeply the reasons why participants withdraw from programmes. Also, for higher response rates it might be helpful to address learners very soon after they finish using the material.

Recommendations for Future Research

To advance the research into the field of materials evaluation and materials design, particularly when it comes to self-access materials, further studies should continue to address the end-users: the learners. Despite being time-consuming, directly addressing learners on how they engage with a given material is needed for actual insights into what learners want and in what ways they need to be informed for better learning when on their own.

The majority of the participants in this study had very little experience learning English before using *English M1*, particularly on their own. Future studies should identify whether learners at more advanced levels (learners who already spent some time learning an L2) are more skilled in regard to learning strategies. If this is true, it would be interesting to know whether this makes self-access materials more appropriate to more advanced level learners, who might more wisely know how to identify and explore the affordances of the material made available to them, than lower level learners who, assumedly, have less experience on taking control of their own learning.

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