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Lifelong Language Learning...by Watching TV?

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Language learning is a lifelong journey that begins in infancy. To ensure continuous growth, especially in expanding our vocabulary, we must consistently build upon our existing knowledge. However, as we grow older and our lives settle into a routine of work and rest, finding the motivation or opportunities to expand our vocabulary further can become challenging. Therefore, we must be inventive in discovering ways to keep language learning alive beyond formal education.

These days, I typically unwind after work by watching TV series on streaming platforms. Whether it's Netflix, Prime, or Disney+, many other working adults share this pastime. More recently, I came across interesting series, such as 'The Sandman' and 'Foundation.' The former is a fantasy genre, and the latter is more science fiction. Despite the different plotlines, conflicts, and issues, both series share one standard quality: the use of uncommon words in their dialogue.

When watching these types of series, you will notice the characters using words like '*cathartic*' and '*expatiate*' in their conversations. If you do not understand these terms, it could hinder your comprehension of the entire plotline, which would be frustrating, especially if you are already deeply invested in the program. Consequently, you may turn on the subtitles to grasp the words the characters are using. By observing how the actors incorporate these words into their sentences, you can discover how they are used in their intended contexts.

Such observation has sparked the idea that busy working adults can expand their vocabulary by watching TV series. It is fun and much more enjoyable (especially if you are not that into reading) and can be done while unwinding after a difficult day. Studies, such as those by Peters (2018) and Teng (2022), have shown that watching TV series can also lead to incidental vocabulary acquisition for people from ESL backgrounds. But how exactly does watching TV series help expand vocabulary?

1) Authentic Language Use

TV series regularly portray real-life conversations, slang, and expressions that are unavailable in conventional textbooks. This helps learners acquire words in a more natural manner and setting. In addition, the audience learns how to pronounce words correctly.

2) Contextual Learning

By listening to and modelling after characters in TV series and their use of uncommon words, the audience is presented with a more meaningful context for using those words appropriately. This is undoubtedly more practical than the dreary word lists we often get assigned in a traditional classroom when learning a language.

3) Cultural Insights

Language is deeply tied to culture. TV series often showcase idioms, gestures, and comedic



references specific to their culture of origin. This could make viewers' incidental language learning more apt and nuanced.

4) Repetition and Recall

Popular series feature recurring words and catchphrases. This process of repetition reinforces learners' learning, especially when they have been previously exposed to those words. Recalling the words they have learned from other series would help retain vocabulary longer in their minds.

In conclusion, the simple act of being a couch potato could be beneficial for lifelong language learning. It combines entertainment and education, making it a more enjoyable and effective process for adults who are busy balancing their domestic and professional lives. By applying a bit of strategising — choosing good shows and tracking your vocabulary expansion—everyone can turn their regular screen time into a compelling language-learning tool.

References

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