



ESCOLA DE
HUMANIDADES

BELT

Brazilian English Language Teaching Journal

BELT, Porto Alegre, v. 11, n. 1, p. 1-24, jan.-jun. 2020
e-ISSN: 2178-3640

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15448/2178-3640.2020.1.36650>

SEÇÃO: DIDACTIC SEQUENCE

Informal English through sitcoms: a didactic proposal

Inglês informal através de séries: uma proposta didática

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Received on: Dec. 12th, 2019.

Approved on: Jun. 04th, 2020.

Published on: Jan.11th, 2021.

Abstract: In light of studies on informal language teaching (Senefonte, 2018) and drawing on Socio-discursive Interactionism (Bronckart, 1999), this research aims at presenting a didactic proposal involving a sequence of systematized activities that address informal English through the sitcom genre. Therefore, this study belongs to the area of Applied Sociolinguistics and the field of language teaching/learning and teacher education. The first episode of the show *How I met your mother* forms the basis for the development of the exercises, which encompass current trends in language teaching and learning. The literature review conducted in this paper reveals the scarcity of studies on the teaching of informal English through sitcoms or any other audiovisual genre, suffice it to prove relevant the debate on this theme. To sum up, this paper is expected to expand the literature on this topic and enable teachers to reflect over their practices concerning language variations.

Keywords: Informal English; Didactic proposal; Sitcoms.

Resumo: À luz de estudos sobre o ensino de linguagem informal (Senefonte, 2018) e baseando-se no Interacionismo Sociodiscursivo (Bronckart, 1999), esta pesquisa tem como objetivo apresentar uma proposta didática envolvendo uma sequência de atividades sistematizadas que abordam o inglês informal através do gênero séries. Portanto, este estudo pertence à área da Sociolinguística Aplicada e ao campo de ensino/aprendizagem de línguas e formação de professores. O primeiro episódio da série *How I met your mother* forma a base para o desenvolvimento dos exercícios, que abrangem tendências contemporâneas no ensino de línguas. A revisão de literatura realizada neste trabalho revela a escassez de estudos sobre o ensino do inglês informal por meio de séries ou qualquer outro gênero audiovisual, suficiente para provar relevante o debate sobre esse tema. Em resumo, espera-se que este artigo expanda a literatura sobre esse tópico e permita que os professores reflitam sobre suas práticas no que diz respeito às variações linguísticas.

Palavras-Chave: Inglês informal. Proposta didática. Séries.

1. Introduction

Learning a language goes beyond the study of grammar rules and vocabulary found in most textbooks. To communicate in an effective way, it is essential to know how to use such language appropriately in multifarious situations, depending on the place, the relationship between the speakers and the context as a whole (Washburn, 2001). When a language is taught, not only its standard variation must be included, but also its other 'parts' (considering that language is a multifaceted phenomenon). Hence, it is the school's role to teach the other varieties of the language, including its informal usage.

Everyday speeches, like greetings between friends, a phone call to a family member, a dinner party with co-workers or a simple text message,



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can require the use of informal language. It means that the teaching of this variety cannot be neglected, since its knowledge is needed for the most trivial situations in life.

That being said, this investigation intends to answer the following question: how can informal English be addressed in the classroom? In line with it, the aim of this paper is to present a didactic proposal which encompasses idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, reductions and other features of informal English through the sitcom genre, providing an authentic material, ready to be used in class, as well as coming up with ideas of activities for teachers to create their own didactic sequences, embracing multiple language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, cultural, sociopragmatic, sociolinguistic etc.) in an integrated way and other current trends in language teaching/learning.

This study is underpinned by Socio-discursive Interactionism (Bronckart, 1999), one of the perspectives on text genres. According to Cristovão (2007) and the Brazilian Official Guidelines (Brasil, 2000; Paraná, 2008), language is built through social interactions, and the best way to develop the language capacities is working with text genres. The sitcom genre was the choice made for this proposal, specifically the first episode of *How I met your mother (HIMYM)*, due to its popularity among teenagers and young adults, at whom the activities presented are aimed.

Furthermore, sitcoms are great sources of informal and authentic language. Such fact, added to the importance of having an informal repertoire to a more fluid communication, would be enough to justify a research on this topic. However, the literature review conducted in this paper points out a dearth of studies scrutinizing the teaching of informal language through sitcoms and other audiovisual genres, which strengthens even more the reasons why this subject deserves to be discussed.

Regarding the structural organization of this paper, it is composed of this introduction, which contextualizes the problem; two sections delving into the theories around informal English and text genres; a section with the result of some systematic

research that shows previous studies on the same topic and a discussion on these studies; a methodological section to explain how the didactic proposal was developed; the didactic proposal itself, with a detailed description of the sequence of activities; and the final considerations. Also, it is worth mentioning that the didactic material produced through this study is attached in the appendix.

2. Informal English

In order to better understand informal English, an overview of Sociolinguistics is deemed necessary, since informal language is one of its domains. To put it in a very simple way, we can assume that the main object of study of Sociolinguistics is language in its real and multifarious uses in society (Alkmin, 2012). According to Senefonte (2018, p. 25), "the focus of Sociolinguistics is on the effects of social factors on language". Taking into account the fact that society is composed of people from different cultures, backgrounds, ages, genders, who belong to diverse social groups, it seems safe to aver that language variations will occur, and the informal aspect is included in these variational phenomena.

Language variation can be caused by internal factors of different levels, such as phonetic/phonological, lexical, syntactical, semantic, stylistic ones, and so forth. Yet, language varies mostly due to external factors, synchronically and diachronically. The *synchronic variations* are categorized into *diatopic* (owing to geographical aspects), *diastratic* (because of social groups), *diaphasic* (resting upon the degree of formality/informality), and *diamesic* (which involves different channels of communication, viz. oral/written). Regarding the *diachronic variation*, it is related to the changes that a language has been through over the years (Alkmin, 2012; Senefonte, 2018).

That being said, Senefonte (2018, p. 28) concludes that "informal language is *originally* a type of diaphasic variation. Nonetheless, it can embrace a diamesic, diastratic or diatopic variation, hinging on the context. Additionally, it can eventuate in all language segments (phonetic, lexical and so on)".

Since the intention of this paper is to work on informal English in the didactic proposal presented later, some features of informal language must be mentioned. For instance, the reduction/removal of sounds, a kind of *metaplasm*² known as *elision*, is very common in informal contexts, such as "gonna, wanna, 'till, 'cause". The omission of parts of speech is called *ellipsis*, which happens, for example, to the auxiliary in the question "you like coffee?". When the speaker wants to fill time thinking about what to say next, *fillers* like "hmm, you know?, er, I mean" may be employed. *Emotional language* is usually present in intimate situations and it can express impoliteness or endearment, like "son of a bitch!, damn it!, sweetie". Other characteristics of informal English are *idioms*, *slang*, some *phrasal verbs* and *collocations* to name a few (Engkent, 1986; Senefonte, 2018).

Corroborating the significance of Sociolinguistics for the teaching/learning process, it can be stated that a language is dynamic and shaped by our social interactions. As informal English is part of the language in use, students should know how to employ it appropriately. According to the Brazilian Official Guidelines (Brasil, 2000; Paraná, 2008), one of the roles of language teaching is to introduce different varieties of the target language in the classroom, so that students will be able to understand and interact in different contexts of communication. For this purpose, the official documents recommend a language teaching based on text genres, the topic to be discussed in the next section.

3. Discursive/text genres

Studies concerning discursive/text genres³ have been developed since the Ancient Rhetoric with Plato. Brandão (2003) attests that these studies have been in the agenda of researchers for centuries, although they came to the center of discussion in the linguistic area only in the 1960s, when linguistics stopped focusing on the small units of a text, like phonemes and words, and

started giving attention to the text as a whole.

Result of so many years of study on the topic, there are several theoretical-methodological perspectives to address genres. Bakhtin (1997), for instance, defines discursive genres as social practices grouped into spheres of circulation. Each sphere in society has its own written and oral genres. In the professional sphere, there are genres as résumé, business letter and job interviews, which are formal. On the other hand, people tend to use more informal genres in the family sphere, like text messages, jokes and anecdotes. For Bakhtin (1997), discursive genres are relatively stable. It means that they usually have predefined characteristics, but they can change depending on the context. That is why it is so important to focus on the social aspects of a text.

The theoretical and methodological framework created by Bronckart and a group of contributors from Geneva receives the name of Socio-Discursive Interactionism (SDI, henceforth), the perspective on which this didactic proposal is drawing. This theory is based on a compilation of many other studies on human science, such as the notions of language and discursive approach discussed by Bakhtin, the concepts regarding the learning process fostered by Vygotsky, and text genres as an instrument to be used in the classroom and in didactic sequences as Dolz and Schneuwly suggest (Cristovão, 2007).

Concerning SDI, it is correct to state that its main idea is related to the fact that language is built through social interactions. According to Cristovão (2007, p. 9, *translated*), "it is in the social activities in a social formation that language actions are developed". Hence, the concept of SDI is intimately intertwined with the object of study of Sociolinguistics, the area in which this paper is inserted.

However, language teaching through discursive genres cannot be limited to analyzing social issues in a text, all the language capacities are equally relevant to SDI when reading or producing a written or oral genre. Defined by Dolz, Pasquier and Bronckart (1993),

² According to Senefonte (2018), metaplasm is a phonetic change that occurs when a sound is added, reduced or modified. They may result in orthographic changes as well.

³ Herein, we understand genre as both a textual and discursive artifact (Marcuschi, 2008).

language capacities are the necessary aptitudes to create a text in a given situation of interaction. The authors categorized them into action, discursive and linguistic-discursive capacities. Although they are divided into three, when studying a text genre, they cannot be disassociated.

By activating the *action capacities*, it is possible to build meaning through the context, taking into account who has produced the text, to whom it is addressed, when and where it was created, and its purpose. The *discursive capacities* aim at recognizing the structure of the genre, such as the layout and the type of language employed. At last, the *linguistic-discursive capacities* are related to the way that linguistic resources operate in the genre, considering grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, coherence and so on (Cristovão, 2009).

In order to choose a text genre for a lesson, one needs some careful thought. It is essential to have in mind the teaching goals. If the objective is to explore informal English in a text, a genre in which informality is strongly present would be the best choice. Through systematized didactic activities, not only informal language can be approached, but also the aforementioned language capacities. A great example of text that fits this proposal is the sitcom audiovisual genre, which is detailed in the next subsection.

3.1 Sitcom as a genre

Short form for situation comedies, sitcoms are a series of episodes that take no longer than half an hour. Hložková (2013, p. 3) explains that they "have been the source of relaxation and entertainment since the 1950s, when they moved from BBC Radio transmission to BBC TV channel in the United Kingdom". What distinguishes sitcoms from other TV series is humor as the main feature. The plot revolves around the central characters involved in comic situations.

There seems to be a consensus on the popularity of sitcoms among teenagers and young adults, at whom the activities that this study

intends to propose are aimed. Students learn better when in contact with things they enjoy and are familiarized with. In addition, this genre is a source of authentic language. Hložková (2013, p. 5) postulates that sitcoms "mirror modern society and reflect social changes". With regard to English teaching, Senefonte (2018, p. 54) affirms that, "by employing real language, the teacher can explore the multifold features of it, which entails informal/ colloquial language as well".

Besides providing content for the study of the language itself, sitcoms also show cultural aspects. Siqueira (2011) points out that it is impossible to separate a language from its culture. The author advocates for the teaching of English as a lingua franca and, considering that there are many sitcom characters who are not native English speakers, this is another facet of English that can be addressed in the classroom through this audiovisual genre.

Sitcoms are a multifaceted genre and activities based on it can embrace other current trends in language teaching/learning, as integrated skills and critical literacy (Usó-Juan, Martínez-Flor, 2006; Zhang, 2015). Suffice it to say that such facts strengthen the choice of the genre for this proposal.

4. Research on Informal English Teaching

The aim of this section is to present studies on informal English teaching that are similar to the present research. It is of utmost importance to take into account antecedent studies on the same topic to support the discussion.

For this purpose, a literature review was conducted between April and May of 2019 in the following databases: CAPES⁴, ERIC⁵, Google⁶ and Google Scholar⁷. The search terms employed in English were: "*Informal English teaching through sitcoms*", "*Colloquial English teaching through sitcoms*", "*Teaching slang*", "*Teaching idioms*" and "*Informal English in TV series*". In Portuguese, the terms were: "*Ensino de inglês informal através*

⁴ Official website <https://catalogodeteses.capes.gov.br/catalogo-teses/#/>.

⁵ Official website <https://eric.ed.gov/>.

⁶ Official website <https://www.google.com/>.

⁷ Official website <https://scholar.google.com.br/>.

de séries”, “Ensino de inglês coloquial através de séries”, “Ensino de gírias em inglês”, “Ensino de expressões idiomáticas em inglês”, “Inglês informal em séries de TV”. The criteria adopted for the selection of the studies are listed below:

- a) research whose focus is on informal English teaching;
- b) approach to informal English through audiovisual genres, such as sitcoms, TV series, movies, video clips and so on;

c) studies that propose or suggest didactic activities;

d) there was no time period, place or context delimitation.

In total, 7 studies were selected, 2 carried out in Brazil and 5 internationally. The papers, dissertations and a thesis will be discussed in the next paragraphs. The following chart summarizes some information about them.

Chart 1 – Studies on informal English teaching through audiovisual genres

Study	Focus	Audiovisual Genre	Place
Cañado (2009) (paper)	Real English	Sitcom, TV series, podcast	Spain
Frumuselu (2015) (doctoral thesis)	Colloquial language learning	TV series	Spain
Hložková (2013) (master's dissertation)	Authentic Language	Sitcom	Czech Republic
Rachmijati (2015) (paper)	Slang	Movie	Indonesia
Ramalho (2011) (master's dissertation)	Chunks of language	TV series	Brazil
Silva (2016) (paper)	Slang	TV series	Brazil
Washburn (2001) (paper)	Pragmatic language	Sitcom	The USA

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Cañado (2009) defines real English as the language that is, in fact, employed in English-speaking countries. She claims that textbooks and dictionaries are not reliable materials for keeping students up to date with colloquial language. Therefore, the author suggests diverse sources of real English input, including telecollaboration⁸, sitcoms, TV series, podcasts, Internet texts, and recent bestsellers. Regarding telecollaboration, there are extracts of conversations that students of a project in Spain had had with native English speakers. When it comes to sitcoms and TV series, there are some photos of proposed activities in the

appendix, but they are almost illegible. Concerning podcasts, Internet texts and bestsellers, the paper mentions some materials to be used, but no examples of activities are included.

Multimodal texts connect people with different cultures and they are excellent materials for language teaching. In light of this premise, Frumuselu (2015) sought to analyze how the use of subtitled and captioned audiovisual genres can benefit the acquisition of informal language and improve oral production. The researcher undertook a study with 49 students from Spain, comparing their performance using informal

⁸ Telecollaboration, in the language learning context, is an Internet-based exchange between people from different places and cultures aiming at improving language skills and establishing intercultural communication (Guth, Helm, 2010).

language before and after their exposure to the TV series (*Sitcom*) *Friends* with subtitles in their mother tongue and in English. The conclusion showed that both kinds of subtitles are efficient for language learning, but the results of the students who watched the show with English subtitles were better. Although the author does not propose a didactic sequence in her thesis, there is a detailed description of the activities that were used in the research as well as the activities themselves in the appendices. Additionally, various suggestions of exercises to teach informal language using TV series are provided throughout the study.

Bearing in mind that sitcoms are motivational tools for integrating authentic language and culture, Hložková (2013) conducted a study with English language teachers at Czech secondary and language schools to take their experience, ideas and needs into account before developing a set of activities and guidelines for teachers based on three episodes of different sitcoms. There are 10 exercises of each group: pre-, while- and post-viewing. The activities are varied and encompass humor, authentic language, culture, pragmatics, as well as the four language skills. The rich material can be used as it was designed, but the activities can also be adjusted according to the students' level and they can serve as an inspiration for the production of teaching materials about other sitcoms or other audiovisual genres.

Rachmijati (2015) carried out an investigation in order to describe how slang is used in the movie *Juno* and analyzed if this content can be used as teaching material. The researcher found 73 slang utterances in the movie and concluded that *Juno* is suitable for the teaching of slang in the classroom of English as a second language (ESL). Although the paper does not devise a didactic proposal, it provides all the parts of the movie where slang words were found and suggests the use of this material with high school students, since it is a good example of how to use slang in real life. The author warns that slang can often be related to rude and sexual matters and, for this reason, it can only be used among close friends, relatives and acquaintances.

Ramalho (2011) conducted a study on how American TV series can be used in the English language classroom to teach chunks of language, such as collocations, phrasal verbs and idioms. The investigation also discusses the communicative approach, the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), and the importance of teaching the cultural aspects of a language. The author gathered the chunks of language and cultural references found in the script of the pilot episode of the TV series *Gilmore Girls* and proposed some didactic activities based on the analysis. The way that the activities are designed to approach informal language through TV series is a good example of how this topic can be addressed in the classroom through an audiovisual genre.

Silva (2016) advocates for the teaching of slang, grounded in the literature on language variation present in Senefonte's studies. Taking into consideration the necessity of working with text genres that motivate students, the researcher reports her experience with a sequence of activities involving an episode of the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* that contains American slang and idioms. She used the didactic sequence with Brazilian high school students, intending to lead them to understand that informal language cannot be translated word by word, because the sociocultural aspect of the language must be considered. The awareness of the relation between slang and culture is a good start for introducing the topic, but exercises whose focus is on teaching students how to use informal language appropriately would be welcome afterwards.

In her insightful paper, Washburn (2001) underscores that learning a language is much more than learning its structure and vocabulary, because it is of paramount importance to know how to use the language in different situations depending on the level of formality. The author also postulates that pragmatic language is limited to textbooks and, for most ESL students, the only contact they have with English is at school. With this in mind, she suggests the use of sitcoms in ESL classes, because this genre presents models of pragmatic language use in various contexts. A

sample of a lesson plan to teach students how to introduce themselves and others is provided in the paper. Teachers can use the guide working with the sitcom of their choice.

4.1 Discussion on the studies

The literature review exposed in the previous section shows the scarcity of research approaching informal English through audiovisual genres in order to propose didactic materials. Moreover, although technology is constantly advancing and it is much easier for teachers to bring movies, TV series and sitcoms to the classroom nowadays, the most recent study in the findings was written in 2016, three years ago. It shows that research in this area does not keep up with technological changes. The popularity of streaming websites and the aforesaid kinds of entertainment do not seem to motivate researchers worldwide to update education by exploring audiovisual genres and their relation to informal English.

It is vital to emphasize the importance of the studies found, since they provide theoretical-methodological support for other research in the area of Applied Sociolinguistics, as well as they can serve as a starting point for teachers who intend to work with informal English through sitcoms and similar genres. All the studies scrutinized propose or, at least, suggest activities that approach informal language. It is worth listing their positive features and pointing out gaps they may have:

- a) With regard to current trends in language teaching, such as language variation, text genres, digital and critical literacy, integrated skills, and English as a lingua franca, only one research encompasses all of them in the theoretical sections (Frumuselu, 2015);
- b) even in the thesis mentioned above, the exercises suggested do not stimulate digital and critical literacy. In fact, these trends are not present in any of the proposed activities of any study;
- c) most of the studies aim at highlighting language variation of any nature found in the audiovisual genre that is being explored, but two of them opted for focusing

only on slang, a specific aspect of language variation (Rachmijati, 2015; Silva, 2016);

d) some studies recommend didactic material and features of informal English that can be investigated through them, but do not shed light on how to do this (Cañado, 2009; Rachmijati, 2015);

e) only one investigation focuses on the importance of knowing the appropriate contexts to use informal language (Washburn, 2001);

f) two studies dovetail with this paper (Hložková, 2013; Ramalho, 2011). They sought to work on various aspects of informal English through sitcoms or TV series integrated with almost all the other current trends in language teaching.

Based on this discussion, this paper will present a didactic proposal aiming at minimizing the gaps found in previous research, as well as contributing to expand the literature in this area. Before moving on to the practical part of the proposal, it is important to understand how it was built, which is reported in the methodological section.

5. Methodology

The motivation to construct a didactic proposal based on informal English and text genre came through the reading of studies that scrutinized the topic, the same studies that are cited in the literature review of this research.

The next step was the selection of the genre to be worked on. Situation comedy was the choice, because "sitcoms present many models of appropriate pragmatic language use among various characters of differing status, familiarity, gender, and in varied settings, such as at work, at home, in public places, and at formal gatherings" (Washburn, 2001, p. 22). The popularity of the genre among the target audience (teenagers and young adults) was also an important point taken into consideration, as well as the wide range of exercises that could be elaborated from sitcoms involving current trends in language teaching/learning, namely: language variation, English as a

lingua franca, integrated skills, critical literacy and, obviously, text genres (Cristóvão, 2005; Francescon, Senefonte, Baronas, 2013; Siqueira, 2011; Usó-Juan, Martínez-Flor, 2006; Zhang, 2015 and others).

Subsequently, it was necessary to choose a specific sitcom for the activities. *HIMYM* was the show chosen for this proposal. It is a very famous American sitcom aired from 2005 to 2014 and it is about the everyday life of a group of five friends. The first episode of the first season was selected for the exercises.

Then, it was time to think about diverse types of exercises and organize them in a didactic way throughout the sequence of activities, which were divided into three lessons. The first one presents an overview of the show and its context of production, reception and circulation. Lesson 2 consists of before-, while- and after-watching exercises. The choice of the excerpts of the episode for this lesson was made by observing the scenes where aspects of informal English were employed, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, reductions, emotional language, ellipsis and fillers. This lesson also provides a gist of English as a

lingua franca and questions concerning language awareness. The third lesson comprises exercises that explore the plot and the characteristics of the sitcom genre. Finally, there is an answer key and some explanations that can be useful for teachers.

A more thorough description of the activities will be provided in the next section, so that the didactic proposal can be used as a practical guide in the classroom and teachers will be able to apply it. The activities can also serve as a starting point for teachers to produce their own materials involving the sitcom genre, as well as other genres where informal language is found.

6. Didactic Proposal

This section intends to explain in detail the didactic sequence on informal English that is attached in the appendix of this paper. Approximately 3 hours are necessary to conclude the activities proposed. The chart below provides an overview of the didactic sequence. After that, the steps to be followed will be described.

Chart 2 – Didactic Sequence

	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3
Contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Questions about TV genres; - introduction of the show <i>HIMYM</i> and its central characters; - research on the context of production, reception and circulation of the show. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal words, idioms, phrasal verbs, reductions, fillers, ellipsis and emotional language; - language awareness; - English as a lingua franca. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Characteristics of the sitcom genre; - non-verbal communication; - understanding of the plot; - personal questions related to the plot.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduce the topic of the didactic sequence; - learn who created the show and who the target audience is; - identify the purpose of its creation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the meaning of informal language through the context; - make students aware of how, when, where and with whom to use informal language; - discuss the importance of English as a globalized language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognize the features of the sitcom genre; - draw attention to non-verbal language; - stimulate general understanding of the episode; - work on social and personal issues that arose from the plot.
Language Capacities	Action capacity	Discursive-linguistic capacity	Discursive capacity

	Lesson 1	Lesson 2	Lesson 3
Integrated Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listening; - speaking; - reading; - writing; - sociopragmatic; - cultural. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listening; - reading; - writing; - sociopragmatic/ sociolinguistic; - cultural. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Listening; - speaking; - reading; - writing; - sociopragmatic/ sociolinguistic; - cultural.
Time Length	50 minutes	80 minutes	50 minutes

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Initially, the teacher must print out the didactic sequence and give a copy for each student. Also, the first episode of the first season of *HIMYM* must be ready to be played, with the audio in English and, preferably, with English subtitles. It is highly recommended the purchase of the show. There is a box with all the nine seasons of the sitcom on sale, but it is also possible to buy only one season online. A TV set or a projector will be needed in the classroom, as well as electronic devices with internet access.

Lesson 1 starts with a warm-up exercise. The students can work in pairs or groups to discuss the questions. The aim of this activity is to verify how familiarized they are with TV genres and to practice both oral skills (listening and speaking) in an integrated way. For this purpose, the teacher must suggest that the students agree or disagree with their partners and ask additional questions about the series and movies mentioned in their answers.

After that, reading and cultural skills are explored. There is a brief description of *HIMYM*, and the main characters are introduced. They can be localized in a picture next to the introductory text. Knowing their names can be useful in the completion of the exercises throughout the didactic sequence because some questions require attention to specific characters.

To develop the action capacity, the students can use the internet on their smartphones or computers to search for some pieces of information to complete a chart about the context of production, reception and circulation of *HIMYM*. It is of utmost importance to have access to this data when working on text genres. To understand

a text deeply it is necessary to know its social implications at the time it was produced, who created it and its target audience. A link to an article about the show is provided to help with the understanding of the aforementioned context. The students are supposed to read the article to answer some questions in the chart. So, reading and writing skills are integrated in this exercise.

Lesson 2 was designed to develop the linguistic-discursive capacity, focusing on informal English. It starts with a box exemplifying some aspects of informal language and a before-watching exercise. The students have to make inferences and guesses about the meaning of some informal words, idioms and phrasal verbs. At this point, the first 3'04" of the episode must be played, so that students can check their answers in the first exercise and do the next one, which works on the reductions that appear in the excerpt. In exercise 4, there are some questions concerning language awareness, which will make students think about language prejudice, appropriate situations to employ formal and informal language and why people use reductions in spoken and written English. In this respect, sociopragmatic and sociolinguistic skills are explored.

In the same lesson, there is another explanatory box with important definitions of some features of informal language. Six short excerpts of the episode were selected for the next exercises. The first one encompasses an idiom, ellipsis, emotional language and an informal greeting. For the excerpt 2, there are questions involving the analysis of the context to figure out the meaning of

some informal expressions. Excerpt 3 brings out a filler and an informal expression. Besides working on another reduction and other informal words, the exercise about excerpt 4 draws attention to the contexts where using this variety of the language would not be discriminated against. In the fifth excerpt, one of the characters uses the term "chicken out" to indicate that her friend had not been brave enough in a situation. Then, the students have to give their opinions about the fact. In excerpt 6, a secondary character joins the friends' reunion. This character is from India and the questions try to bring English as a lingua franca and language prejudice into the discussion. It is also a great opportunity for the teacher to talk about globalization and English language. All over the lesson, reading, writing, listening, sociopragmatic/sociolinguistic and intercultural skills are developed.

Lesson 3 explores the plot and the features of the sitcom genre. Therefore, the language capacity focused on this part of the didactic sequence is the discursive capacity. First, the full episode with 22 minutes long will be watched. After that, in exercise 1, the students have to associate the characteristics of the sitcom genre (humor, dialogues involving everyday situations, catchphrases etc.) with some examples taken from the episode. Non-verbal communication, an important feature of TV genres, is approached in exercises 1 and 2. The second one brings back a discussion between the characters about a possible signal that Robin gave to Ted. To write their opinions, the students need to interpret the body language present in the scene.

The third exercise of lesson 3 encompasses reading and cultural skills through some multiple-choice questions regarding the general comprehension of the plot, which raises issues like existential crisis, changes in life and love. Subsequently, there is a box with some personal questions to be discussed in pairs, integrating the oral skills again. The content of the questions is linked to the issues that arose from the episode.

At the end of the didactic sequence, an answer key is provided to the teacher. These answers will

help with the students' evaluation, but it is important to make it clear that some of them are just possible responses, since more options can fit the exercises.

Finally, after working with multiple language skills and the three language capacities by exploring the context of production, reception and circulation of the show, informal English, language awareness, the characteristics of the genre, the plot and the problems discussed in the episode, it is time to give the students a feedback on their work and make sure that they understood in which situations they can employ the kind of language approached in *HIMYM*. If the students liked the show, the teacher can stimulate them to watch other episodes at home to improve their English and be entertained at the same time.

7. Final Considerations

The first lines of this paper highlight the significance of teaching other varieties of a language besides the standard one. Senefonte (2018, p. 26) postulates that society is heterogeneous and so is language, that is, since society is comprised of different agents with diverse experiences, there is a wide range of language variations as well, including the informal ones. Yet, it is important to mention that a language does not vary only due to social stratification, but also owing to internal factors, like metaplasms.

Thus, living in a stratified society and establishing meaningful dialogues requires some linguistic competences that are not limited to the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, knowing cultural aspects and how to employ the language in a given context appropriately is essential (sociolinguistic/pragmatic skills). Schools cannot ignore this fact. So, in order to conclude this study, it is time to bring back the research question and the aims previously set.

How can informal English be addressed in the classroom? As the Brazilian Official Guidelines demand a language teaching based on text genres, the didactic proposal exposed in this study, drawing on SDI, was developed to teach informal aspects of English and promote language awareness through the sitcom genre, one of the

research aims. Another aim that is believed to have been accomplished is the production of authentic activities, which can be used in class and/or serve as a starting point for teachers to produce their own didactic material.

The biggest challenge of this study was to embrace, in the same proposal, all the language capacities that the work with genres offers and cover the other current trends in language teaching/learning (viz. text genres, criticalness, lingua franca, integrated skills, language variation and so forth). It is worth mentioning that this paper is limited to a theoretical review and a didactic proposal, which has not been administered and tested yet. Hence, this work can be continued in some empirical research.

Finally, as evidenced in the literature review, scant attention has been given to the teaching of informal English through sitcoms or any other audiovisual genre. Therefore, it is expected that this research may contribute to expand the literature on informal language, because this topic is more important than it might seem at first glance. Language has the power to change and be changed by society, it can include or exclude, it all depends on how we make use of it.

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APPENDIX

(Didactic Proposal: Informal English Through Sitcoms)

INFORMAL ENGLISH THROUGH SITCOMS

HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER

Context of Production

WARM-UP

In pairs or groups, discuss the following questions:

- What's your favorite kind of TV show?
- Do you like sitcoms, TV series and movies? If so, which ones?
- Have you ever watched the sitcom *How I met your mother*?
- Considering the name of the show, what do you think it may be about?



How I met your mother (HIMYM) is an American sitcom aired from 2005 to 2014, with 208 episodes, divided into 9 seasons. The plot revolves around the life of the main character, Ted Mosby, and his group of friends – Lily, Marshall, Robin, and Barney (in the picture: behind Ted, respectively from the left to the right). In the year 2030, Ted tells his two children, through flashbacks, the story of how he met their mother.

RESEARCH TIME!

You can use a smartphone or a computer with internet connection to fulfill the following tasks:

Access <https://www.google.com/>.

Search for the information requested in the next box to fill it in.

Read the text available at HYPERLINK

"<https://watercoolerjournal.com/how-i-met-your-mother/>"

<https://watercoolerjournal.com/how-i-met-your-mother/>. It can help you with



**HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER
PRODUCTION, RECEPTION & CIRCULATION**

Created by: _____

Executive producers: _____

Premiered in: _____

Main cast: _____

The story takes place in: _____

Where/How it can be seen nowadays: _____

Answer the questions:

What is *HIMYM* about? _____

Which sitcom with a similar plot preceded *HIMYM*? _____

Who is *HIMYM* aimed at?

Why do you think the creators of *HIMYM* gave life to characters with so many similarities to the ones in the antecedent sitcom?

Which examples of intertextual references does *HIMYM* use to connect with its audience? _____



SEASON 01, EPISODE 01

Informal English

1) Look at the words, idioms*, and phrasal verbs* below. Do you know what they mean?
Choose one of the options:

***FEATURES OF INFORMAL ENGLISH:**

Idioms – expressions that usually have a non-literal, figurative meaning.

English is a piece of cake. (It's very easy.)

Soccer is not my cup of tea. (I don't like it very much.)

Phrasal verbs – combinations of verb + preposition/adverb that can be formal, neutral or informal.

Go on. Get away. Give back. Get out!

Reductions – removal of a sound from the beginning, middle or end of a word.

'Cause (because); the loss of /t/ after /n/ in twenty /'twe.ni/; cryin' (crying).

a- Screw something up:

- () Put something in a higher place.
- () Make a mistake or spoil something.

b- Pop (verb):

- () Open something causing an explosive sound.
- () Dance pop music.

c- Got it:

- () I understood what I have to do.
- () Repeat that, please.

d- Dude:

- () Couple.
- () Friend; guy.

e- Are you kidding?:

- () Are you a young child?
- () Are you saying it as a joke?

f- Have a thing for someone:

- () Have a crush on someone.
- () Be someone's boss.

g- Go with:

- () Hurry up.
- () Match.

h- Exhibit A:

- () Movie premiere.

() Example right beside you.



i- Stuff:

() When you are referring to things someone says or does in a general way.

() Particular characteristics of stuffed animals.

2) Watch the first part of the episode to check your answers in exercise 1 and to do exercise 3:

Play it from 00:00 to 03:04

3) Write the informal forms of the words below that are common in speech and appear in the video.

a- Going to: _____

b- Want to: _____

c- Until: _____

4) After watching the first part of the episode, answer the following questions:

a- In exercise 3 you wrote some informal reductions* from the video. What is the situation in which the people involved in the dialogue are when the reductions appear?

b- Did they suffer any kind of prejudice related to their language choice? Why/Why not?

c- Why do people reduce language in spoken and written English?

d- Where do you use informal language? Who do you talk to when you use it?

e- Give examples of situations in which we shouldn't employ this kind of language.

***SOME MORE FEATURES OF INFORMAL ENGLISH:**

Ellipsis – omission of language components.

Wish you were here. (omission of subject)

You like this city? (omission of auxiliary)

Emotional language – it involves impoliteness, such as swearing and cursing.

Fuck you! Damn it!

It also employs terms of endearment, used in intimate situations.

Sweetie, honey.

Fillers – vague language used to fill time.

Ah, well, you know?

5)
Watch
the

▶ following excerpts to complete the tasks on informal language:

Excerpt 1:

▶ Play it from 04:40 to 05:03

Write from the video:

a- A phrasal verb meaning “to say something impulsively”:

b- A question without an auxiliary (ellipsis*):

c- A term of emotional language* (it’s usually used as a swear word, but in this case it indicates endearment and intimacy):

d- An informal greeting:

Excerpt 2:

▶ Play it from 5:16 to 06:02

Check the correct option:

a- Ted asks: “Why am I freaking out all of a sudden?”

What does it mean?

- () He’s wondering why he has started having irrational reactions unexpectedly.
() He wants to know why he has been feeling so tired recently.

b- When Ted says “I’m not ready to settle down”, he means that:

- () He doesn’t want to meet new people.
() He’s not prepared for a serious relationship.

c- Barney asks himself: “How does Carl land a Lebanese girl?”

The word *land*, in this context, means:

- ▶ () go out with
() study with

Excerpt 3:

Play it from 09:39 to 10:15

Answer the questions:

a- Which filler* (hesitation marker) does Robin use to start talking?

b- What does Marshall say to express his optimism about Ted and Robin's date?



—

Excerpt 4:

Play it from 10:15 to 10:43



Write the words/sentences in a more informal way, as they are in the video:

a- have to: _____

b- no: _____

c- no chance: _____

d- I really enjoyed the night: _____

Answer:



e- Is the kind of language employed in this scene appropriate to the context where it is inserted?
Why/Why not?

f- Robin is a TV reporter. What problems might she have if she uses on TV (the news) the same informal words she used in the conversation with Ted?

Excerpt 5:

Play it from 10:44 to 11:06



Give your opinion:

a- Ted didn't kiss Robin on their first date claiming that the moment wasn't right. In your opinion, was his attitude sweet or did he *chicken out like a little bitch*? Explain your answer.

—

Excerpt 6:

Play it from 20:53 to 21:00

Answer the questions:

a- Marshall proposes a toast to his fiancée; Lilly, to the future; what about Ranjit (the older man in the scene)?

b- What does the idiom *one hell of a/an* mean?

—

c- Do you think Ranjit is a native English speaker? Why/Why not?

—

d- Did the younger characters demonstrate any kind of prejudice against Ranjit?

—

e- Can you think of examples of language discrimination present in our society?

—

—

—

f- Is it necessary to sound like a native speaker to communicate? Explain your answer.

—



FULL EPISODE

Exploring the Plot and the Sitcom Genre

Now, watch the full episode. Enjoy it!

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SITCOM GENRE:

Short episodes
 Humor
 Fixed characters throughout the seasons
 Dialogues involving everyday situations
 Catchphrases
 Laugh track
 Informal language
 Non-verbal language

1) Match the characteristics of the sitcom genre in the box above to the examples below, which were taken from the episode:

- () Ted, Robin, Lily, Marshall and Barney.
- () “Have you met Ted?”, Barney asked his famous question.
- () HAHAHA (sound in the background).
- () “Wow, you’re cooking?”, Lily asked. “Yes, I am”, Marshall replied.
- () The episode is 22 minutes long.
- () Disapproving face that Barney and Marshall made when they saw the picture of Ranjit’s wife.
- () “Jerk!”, Robin shouted.
- () “I don’t need to take first kiss advice from some pirate who hasn’t been single since the first week of college”, Ted said to Lily, who was wearing an eyepatch.

2) Non-verbal communication is an important feature of TV genres. In the episode, Ted’s friends claim that Robin gave him a signal to kiss her. In your opinion, was there a signal? If so, which one?

3) Mark the correct option:

a- The episode is mainly about:

- () children
- () meeting new people
- () the fear of changes in life
- () food preferences

b- Ted is apparently going through his quarter-life crisis. What triggered this problem?

- () he doesn’t have friends
- () his best friend is getting engaged and he is afraid of being alone
- () he doesn’t have a solid career

he is getting old and he doesn't want to get married

c- Why is Marshall apprehensive at the beginning of the episode?

- because he's going to propose to Lily
- because Ted wants to get married and leave the house
- because he's going to split up with Lily
- because he found out that Barney is Ted's best friend

d- What is Robin afraid of?

- dogs
- eating olives
- public speaking
- serious relationships

Think about your answers to the questions and comment with your partner:

Have you ever experienced an existential crisis or do you know anyone who has been through it? Can you talk about it?

Is there a minimum or maximum age to get married? Explain your answer.

Is it wrong to tell a person that you love them during the first date? Explain your point of view.

Why are most people afraid of taking the next step in life?

High Five!





TO THE TEACHER

Answers and Comments

ANSWER KEY

LESSON 1

Warm-up: The answers to the questions in the *warm-up section* are personal.

PRODUCTION, RECEPTION & CIRCULATION

Created by: Craig Thomas and Carter Bays.

Executive producers: Craig Thomas, Carter Bays, Pamela Fryman, Rob Greenberg, Chris Harris, Stephen Lloyd, Kourtney Kang, Greg Malins, Eileen Heisler, DeAnn Heline, Jamie Rhonheimer and Chuck Tatham.

Premiered in: 2005.

Main cast: Josh Radnor, Neil Patrick Harris, Cobie Smulders, Jason Segel, Alyson Hannigan and Cristin Milioti.

The story takes place in: New York City (Manhattan).

Where/How it can be seen nowadays: Sony Channel and DVD.

Answer the questions:

What is *HIMYM* about? It tells the story of how Ted met his children's mother and, through flashbacks, it shows the everyday life of a group of friends and funny situations they had been through.

Which sitcom with a similar plot preceded *HIMYM*? *Friends*.

Who is *HIMYM* aimed at? It is especially aimed at teenagers and young adults who like comedy and at those who had grown up watching *Friends*.

Why do you think the creators of *HIMYM* gave life to characters with so many similarities to the ones in the antecedent sitcom? Because the creators intended to set up the air of familiarity among the characters and the audience, resulting in the acceptance of the show (possible answer).

Which examples of intertextual references does *HIMYM* use to connect with its audience? Storyline and characters that can be associated to *Friends*, catchphrases of other shows, mentions of Oprah, and references to wider cultural themes.

LESSON 2

- 1) **a-** Make a big mistake or spoil something.
- b-** Open something causing an explosive sound.
- c-** I understood what I have to do.
- d-** Friend; guy.
- e-** Are you saying it as a joke?
- f-** Have a crush on someone.
- g-** Match.
- h-** Example right beside you.
- i-** When you are referring to things someone says or does in a general way.

2) -

3) a- gonna b- wanna c- till

4) a- They are having informal conversations with friends in their house and in a bar (possible answer).

b- No, they didn't. Because it is very common to use reductions in informal situations (possible answer).

c- We naturally reduce sounds when speaking to make speech more fluid, especially when we speak fast. The frequent use of reductions in spoken English made people start writing them in informal situations as well, like in text messages, for example. It is important to highlight that reductions happen in synchronic situations, that is, real-time communicative events. Time is decisive for reductions. Therefore, people reduce language (spoken/written) as a strategy to communicate effectively in the shortest time possible.

d- Personal answer.

e- Possible answers: In a lecture, in academic writing, when talking to people we do not know, etc.

5) Excerpt 1:

a- slip out

c- you idiot

b- You wanna go out sometime?

d- What's up?

Excerpt 2:

a- He's wondering why he has started having irrational reactions unexpectedly.

b- He's not prepared for a serious relationship.

c- go out with

Excerpt 3:

a- You know b- It is on till the break of dawn

Excerpt 4:

a- gotta b- nope c- no dice d- I had a really great time tonight

e- Yes, it is. Because the characters are on an informal date.

f- Robin has a formal job that requires formal language. If she does not use the appropriate language on the news, she may suffer the consequences – exclusion, discrimination and she can even be fired (possible answer).

Excerpt 5:

a- Personal answer.

Excerpt 6:

a- To one hell of a night

b- This idiom is used to emphasize the noun it modifies and it can have a positive or negative meaning depending on the context.

c- No, he isn't. He has an Indian accent.

d- No, they didn't.

e- There is language discrimination related to people's accent, syntax, size of vocabulary, use of slang, and so on.

f- Absolutely not. The purpose of a conversation is to understand and be understood. If the communication happened, the accent is not a problem (possible answer).

LESSON 3

1) 3 - 5 - 6 - 4 - 1 - 8 - 7 - 2

2) Although it is a personal answer, Robin's long, lingering handshake in Ted could be the signal.

3) a- the fear of changes in life

b- his best friend is getting engaged and he is afraid of being alone

c- because he's going to propose to Lily

d- serious relationships

Box: personal answers.

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