The use of authentic materials in ESL/EFL instruction and teaching materials development has been an on-going demand (e.g., Burns, Gollin, & Joyce, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 1997; Porter & Roberts, 1981; Sherman, 2003). Regarding spoken language, many authors indicate that there are available sources that can provide teachers and learners with authentic spoken materials; one of these sources is television (TV) (e.g., Gebhard, 1996; McCarthy & Carter 1994). Being aware of this source, many teachers and researchers have used different TV programs in their teaching and investigation of effective teaching and learning practices, for example: featured films (e.g., Voller & Widdows, 1993), news (e.g., Morrison, 1989), sitcom (e.g., Washburn, 2001), soap opera (e.g., Grant & Starks, 2001).

For extensive listening practice, autonomous listening strategies development, listening fluency development, access to native speaker models, and even for speaking fluency, it is widely suggested that learners can watch and listen to lengthy spoken texts including TV shows (e.g. Dunkel, 1986; Flowerdew & Miller, 2005; Lazaraton, 2001, Sherman, 2003). It seems that the use of authentic spoken materials is highly recommended for developing language aural and oral skills. However, practitioners are usually faced with the challenge of choosing the appropriate materials for such practice. They all are motivated by the fact that authentic materials represent natural language interaction, but they are confronted with how to determine the naturalness, hence the authenticity, of a given discourse.

Previous classifications of authentic materials were based on practitioners’ personal impressions and intuitions. The study shows that this somewhat subjective approach is problematic and adopts a corpus-based lexico-grammatical approach to investigate the extent to which soap opera, compared to sitcom, reflects the linguistic representation of natural conversation. To reach this goal, the study conducts a multidimensional analysis following Biber’s (1988) model and a frequency-based lexico-grammatical functional analysis based on a group of salient lexico-grammatical features (Quaglio, 2004, 2009). Results of the multidimensional analysis indicate that sitcom is relatively closer to natural conversation than soap opera. The frequency-based lexico-grammatical analysis, on the other hand, suggests that soap opera might represent natural conversation more than sitcom on the selected lexico-grammatical features.

The present study has important implications for researchers, material developers, and teachers. Researchers and those involved in the issue of the use of authentic materials could make use of the corpus-based research tools to evaluate their materials. It should be noted, though, that it
is beyond the time available for teachers to actually evaluate the authenticity of desired TV shows using corpus-based tools. While this is a limitation of the study in terms of its practicality to teachers, the study, however, presents a model for researchers to pursue investigating which TV register or show is more authentic. The ultimate goal is to perhaps generate a list of TV shows that are identified as more authentic for teachers to use.

The results of studies such as this study could inform teachers’ decisions on which register or even TV show they can recommend to their students as a source of more authentic text. Material developers can also search these TV shows for excerpts that could be used in their teaching materials. It should be noted that both registers might be useful (more authentic) with respect to a group of features that teachers or material developers might be targeting.


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