

# ‘MODERN FAMILY’ – THE INCORPORATION OF POPULAR CULTURE IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses the concept of popular culture and its incorporation in the English classroom. It suggests the sitcom ‘Modern Family’ as a suitable example for English language students because of its content and structure. It presents ideas which support the belief that using real-life like situations in the classroom when teaching English as a foreign language has the potential to better prepare non-native speakers for the utilisation of what they have learnt in the areas of English language and culture, and provides them with the opportunity to compare and contrast their own ideas regarding the reality in which native speakers live.

**Keywords:** Modern Family, sitcom, popular culture, English classroom, incorporation

## Introduction

One of the main goals of teaching English to non-native speakers should be to prepare them for real-life situations they encounter on an everyday basis. In general, teachers strive to provide their students with a language model that they can utilise in their future lives and careers. English lessons mostly contain presentation and practice of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Although these are the fundamentals without which hardly any student can go very far, there is still something which needs to be included in the complex of information and experience that students should be exposed to, ideally, while still studying. What I have in mind is experience of how real native speakers of English use the language and how they incorporate it in their lives.

“Internationalization and ever-increasing multiculturalism (plurality of cultures) appear inescapable in each segment of social life and hence it is necessary to educate future generation [sic] so that they may be able to interact with other cultures and embrace cultural diversity” (Bilá, 2010: 1). In the present day when the world has opened to media (especially social media), opportunities to travel, and the frequency of foreign travel (be it holidays, work experience, or student-exchange programmes), cultural competence is more vital than ever. Therefore, the incorporation of forms of popular culture within classroom time can provide students with a valuable addition to their theoretical competence base.

What makes it even easier on the part of the teacher and more attractive on the part of the students is the fact that, nowadays, music and TV programmes are extremely accessible – one does not need to leave the bedroom to listen to native speakers or see them on the screen. This makes popular culture an ideal source and material for a foreign language classroom, as it not only allows students to listen to standard language (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) but also provides examples of colloquial language in more authentic, less artificial situations than a textbook might do and it allows the listener/viewer to immerse themselves in the real-like lives of native speakers.

## 1. Popular Culture

Merriam-Webster’s dictionary (2014, online) defines culture as “the beliefs, customs, arts, etc., of a particular society, group, place, or time“. In other words, it is how a group of people live their everyday lives. Kačmárová (2008: 61) understands the concept of culture in two ways. She claims that, in a broad sense, culture is “a representation of a national, ethnic, or religious background shared by people residing in a particular country“. In a narrower sense, she defines it as something “representing the language itself“. Mistrík (1999) defines

culture as an inherent part of mankind and a means through which experience is passed onto future generations. It is a process of selecting what the new generation chooses to acquire and an unconscious process of imitating the norms and patterns of behaviour. This idea could be furthered and also applied in the process of foreign language and culture acquisition where this kind of experience is passed onto the learners who, by means of observation, gain knowledge about the target culture. The acquisition of a foreign language is necessarily connected to the awareness of the target culture, as it is through the language that one gets to know the culture and, by means of culture, the language use becomes clearer.

Popular culture refers to “television shows, movies, books, musical selections, artworks, products, activities, and events that appeal to the interests and desires of large numbers of people. Popular culture tells us a lot about the people of a society” (Steinberg, 2011, online). As, apart from social media, music and television seem to be the focus of students’ leisure time these days, it seems to be a great opportunity to include these phenomena in the English classroom and, in this way, enrich the syllabus by something that is both entertaining and educational. In this way, without actually realising they are learning, by means of exposing themselves to popular culture, students acquire competence about the target language and society.

“Why bring pop culture into the [...] classroom? It's something students know and can get passionate about, and it also functions as a bridge to academic culture and concerns” (Smith, A.D. – Smith, T.G. 2009: v). Whether in lessons of phonetics and phonology, practical grammar, listening comprehension, or general competence in English as a foreign language, I have always tried to include the views and experience of my students, as it proved to be successful in that the students were far more involved and responsive. People enjoy talking about what they like to do; in this context, the music they like to listen to, the books they like to read, the films they like to watch, etc. Including these topics in lessons of English as a foreign language can motivate students to be more active and creative, as they are allowed to express their opinions on something they find interesting and they can relate to. This is made even more personal if they can identify themselves with what they read/hear/watch. “How often have we watched a television show and thought, ‘Wait a second, are they talking about me?’” (Sandee, 2010, online). If students get involved in listening to/watching what they enjoy and then discuss their views and feelings, it makes them realise there are people with similar views and experiences and it gives them a feeling of belonging.

“Television plays a major role in our daily lives. Not only does it influence our preferences, but it also affects our beliefs, our likes and dislikes. It can strengthen our knowledge and broaden our perspectives. Many different goals are achieved from the [sic] television” (Twitchwill, 2010, online). Therefore, television programmes can be used for a number of enjoyable activities, covering the entire set of language skills, from reading, listening, speaking and writing, as well as sub-skills (vocabulary and grammar). As this also provides them with ideas they can discuss with their peers in and outside the class, it proves to be an apt activity for any topic or area. Clever teachers will utilise this in their classes and, thus, make the learning experience more pleasurable and less reliant on textbooks/direct lecturing.

## **2. The Sitcom**

“The sitcom (situational comedy) is a genre of comedy which introduces a group of characters who share a common environment (e.g. family, private life or workplace) and with a certain degree of overstatement they try to solve a number of issues related to their environment as well as their everyday life. The primary goal of a sitcom is to entertain the audience” (Bilá, 2013: 2). This is why sitcoms are a valuable source of real-life like situations

from which the viewer can learn about the target culture. Non-native speakers can benefit from sitcoms even more, as they can be watched repeatedly and learnt from effortlessly.

According to Mechetti and Hudson (2012, online), “sitcoms are user-friendly due to their brevity and simplicity”. In my own 14-year teaching experience, I have found that sitcoms can be incorporated in the English classrooms in a multitude of ways. I have successfully used them on many occasions. Their format proved to be perfect – a 20-minute long introduction (to a 90-minute long lesson) in the form of an episode has always served as a valuable starting point for discussion, be it on social, cultural, health-related, or political topics; something that can be further developed and built on. Many a time, an episode focused around a specific issue, which served the students as a topic they were eager to discuss, presenting their own views, referring to their own experience, or comparing the cultural aspects they have seen with those of their own background.

The above ideas are, however, not the only way sitcoms can be used in a foreign language classroom. The scripts have also proved to be a good basis for exercises. The teacher can either use them to point out aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, and/or grammar and even use them as ready-made tools when exercising the above aspects of the foreign language in question. Screenshots or freeze-frames of an episode can, for instance, stimulate grammar practice. Using a set grammatical structure, the students can be asked to describe what is happening, what has happened, what they believe is going to happen, etc. They can also be used for vocabulary practice, as the students can describe people, places, and things (clothes, furniture) they can see on the screen, using selected target vocabulary. Moreover, an episode of a sitcom (the teacher can ask the students to watch a selected episode prior to the actual lesson) can also be used as an inspiration for creative writing. The students can write the continuation of a plotline (including dialogues), or an (alternative) ending to the plotline they have seen, or suggest altered plotlines. Furthermore, individual episodes (or their parts) can be utilised in drama lessons, where the teacher can play the muted picture and ask the students to be the narrators – describe what they see, or dub the actors that appear on the screen. Contrariwise, the sound can be played with no picture and the students can be asked to ‘guess’ what is being shown on the screen.

I have successfully implemented scenes from sitcoms (and other television genres) in phonetics and phonology lessons to present a variety of accents and pronunciation aspects, such as the glottal stop or intrusive ‘r’. While students were reluctant (due to their lack of experience) to trust the theoretical information presented, they were more receptive to hearing the above phenomena being used by actual native speakers in authentic situations.

### **3. Incorporating ‘Modern family’ in the English classroom**

#### *3.1 ‘Modern Family’, the sitcom*

The focus of the sitcom ‘Modern Family’, which “brands itself as of-the-times progressive, and maybe even edgy” (Fallon, 2013, online) is the Dunphy family (cf. Picture 1), representing what Americans are likely to see as the ideal family. Phil is a tall, handsome and active father, the breadwinner of the family, who is a realtor and the family clown. He represents the sitcom tradition of a ‘lovable idiot’ with a heart of gold who always strives to do the best for his family but ends up causing more harm than good. Claire is the mum every woman wants to be and every child wants to have – she is pretty, educated and strict with her children and husband when necessary, yet, loving. She decided to be a full-time mum and look after the whole family; still, she has enough time to keep herself fit, run for local government and come to the rescue when Phil’s well-meant, yet unsuccessful, ideas end in disaster. Hayley, the oldest daughter, is gorgeous, albeit a bit simple but makes up for her academic underachievement by being popular. The sitcom, however, shows her as a real, vulnerable young woman with her own problems and issues. Alex is the younger, less

obviously pretty, but extremely bright, daughter who is somewhat of an outsider, since no one in the family entirely understands her level of intelligence. She does her best to fit in, yet, she is proud to be different by being the brains of the family and likes to show it. The sitcom tries to use the two daughters to find a balance by reminding viewers that neither looks nor brains alone are enough in modern society. Luke is the youngest son who (even in his own words) can be cute and, thus, gets away with the many irresponsible things he does. While Luke looks up to his father and frequently tries to copy him (possibly unintentionally), he is sometimes embarrassed by his father's shenanigans. The Dunphys are in no way different from a regular American family, and should the viewers only see them, there would be nothing "modern" (as opposed to traditional) about "Modern Family".

Claire's younger brother Mitch, however, has his own family, which is less traditional, yet, in this day and age, becoming more and more common. Mitch and his partner (and, later, husband) Cameron adopt a Vietnamese girl Lily (Picture 2) and represent a sweet, quirky, gay couple. Cameron plays to the stereotype and, in a way, does justice to those who think of gay men as people who are, above all, fun-loving, but he is also an extremely caring and loving father, while Mitch is the breadwinner of the family and the responsible partner in the marriage. They also embody the popular belief that same-sex couples always comprise of a 'male' and a 'female'. Here, Cameron is the oversensitive, dramatic, flamboyant and artistic type (hence, female), while Mitch is his rational, realistic (male) other half. Nevertheless, the show plays with the above image by making Cameron a former high-school football player and a son of a Missouri farmer (thus, placing him at the masculine end of the scale), whereas Mitch was a teenage ice-skater and has a slender physique (therefore, representing a feminine archetype).



Picture 1: The Dunphys [1]



Picture 2: Mitch, Cameron and Lily [2]



Picture 3: The Pritchetts [3]

Claire and Mitch's father, Jay Pritchett, divorced their mother earlier and married a gorgeous Latina, Gloria, who came with her son, Manny, from her first relationship (Picture 3). Jay embodies the popular concept of the American dream – a self-made man who, despite a lack of formal education, did extremely well and achieved success in his professional life. He is a well-off, kind, supportive and loving elderly (yet, still very agile) husband who, however, likes his own space and, although he loves his wife and step-son very much, is always happy to throw his money so they can do what makes them happy while he is left to doing his own thing. He, moreover, represents the patriotic Republic American who fought in Vietnam who, however, married a foreigner and tries to be understanding (at times with difficulty) of his gay son's 'lifestyle choice' and his step son's poetic nature. Gloria plays on the cultural stereotype of the fiery Colombian who flies from one emotion to another, a poor 'immigrant' now enjoying the finer things in life, despite what she says about not marrying Jay for his money. Manny is an unusual, very non-American, boy who is an old head on young shoulders; he drinks espresso, wears linen suits and 'woos the ladies' in the style that one has not witnessed for decades. It could be seen as something he has brought from his

native culture of charming men in the style of Don Juan. Later, Jay and Gloria have a baby of their own which completes the image of a traditional (yet modern) family.

Kempski (2010, online) defines the sitcom in question as “[a]n ultimate display of the revised family on television”. She claims that ‘Modern Family’ represents “a family of intense age difference and cultural diversity”. She also suggests that, although each family included in the programme has their own problems, they are one big family, which “encounters comedic problems due to differences”, yet, they all learn to accept and love each other in the end. Her view is that, based on the broad range of people considered in families, more people can relate to and enjoy the show.

Signorielli (1990, online) claims that the programme “is not only comical, but in every episode it does transmit a message to the public”. This makes it a relevant source of a multitude of social issues which viewers can identify with and discuss. It also provides them, in an entertaining way, with ideas of how to solve problems and situations anyone may encounter in everyday life. “Modern family is a more realistic look at contemporary life and what a family is like in the United States. Also it adheres firmly to progressive conventional thinking” (ibid). As the programme presents characters of different orientations, affiliations and, to some extent, native cultures, it can be viewed as a programme in which everybody can find themselves as well as (at least some characteristic features of) those they live with, which makes watching the show not only enjoyable but also comforting. The viewers realise the characters find themselves in situations they also experience on an everyday basis, which makes them feel they are, in a way, involved in the show as such or, in other words, that the show mirrors their own lives.

### 3.2 ‘Modern Family’ as an appropriate cultural tool for the English classroom

‘Modern Family’ can be used to enhance and reinforce the skills students have acquired within individual levels of English as a foreign language. The show can provide students with exposure to the following linguistic phenomena:

1. A native, American English, accent (the show is set in California) as opposed to non-native accent represented by Gloria. Her inability to acquire native-like pronunciation due to arrival in the USA later in life is placed against Manny and Lily’s flawless accents (thus, doing justice to believers in Critical Period hypothesis).
2. Correct grammar used by a majority of characters as opposed to Gloria’s incorrect use of English grammar (e.g. past simple questions and negative statements by combining the negative auxiliarily with the –ed form).
3. Higher register used by Alex and Manny as opposed to Hayley and other characters.

As for the social and political phenomena, the show is also a goldmine when it comes to the issues modern society is faced with, such as:

1. The immigrant as a gold-digger, supposedly preying on old rich men, spending their money for their own profit.
2. The reality of the ‘happily married’ as opposed to those who got divorced and, in some cases, remarried to an ‘unorthodox’ partner.
3. Teenage problems are also widely shown, such as the children of the families trying to fit in, to be popular, and to live up to parental expectations,
4. Relationship, as well as cross-generational, problems are also included – the characters find themselves in an array of everyday situations that require addressing promptly and efficiently.
5. Gender roles are brought up in Claire and Phil’s as well as Mitch and Cameron’s relationships by altering the traditional image of the male-female relationship.
6. The influence of technology and social media can mainly be seen in the Dunphy household, where Hayley spends large amounts of time texting and calling her friends,

Claire is made to learn how to use a universal remote control and Phil talks Claire into getting up at an early hour to queue for the newest i-pad for his birthday so that he can, later, link all household appliances to it.

7. The show places a regular (old-school) image of a family (a mother and a father of similar ages with three children) against a family model that is not accepted by all (especially in conservative countries with strong religious affiliation) at the present time in the form a wife who is a whole generation younger than her husband, or a gay couple “allowed” to adopt a baby from a different cultural background and, later, to get married.

The opinion that the sitcom can serve to all tastes is supported by the claim that “there’s just enough progressiveness for conservatives who express their love for Modern Family to prove they’re not completely out-touch socially without alienating their core. It also embodies everything that liberals are supposed to champion, with the added benefit of proving that progressive politics don’t come at the expense of basic family values” (ibid) Moreover, according to Fallon, the viewers and critics did not love the show simple because “it starred a gay couple or a feisty Latina or talked about adoption and immigration and sex” (Fallon, 2013, online) but, mainly, because the show was funny.

## Conclusion

As stated above, enticing students by a show they watch and like has proved a successful way of teaching them about the target culture. If they feel they can identify themselves with one of the characters, it will increase the chances they will willingly watch the show repeatedly. Students are more likely to benefit from the process of education if it is filled with activities they enjoy. ‘Modern Family’ not only provides them with multiple layers of social and political phenomena and ‘food for thought’ but it is also fun. In this way, using individual episodes of the above show can result in entertaining as well as educational lessons on a number of levels. The more the teacher manages to captivate the students, the better the chance they will continue on their own and develop their cultural competence on their own terms.

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