

Listen Carefully, I Shall Say This Only Once: The BBC's *'Allo 'Allo!* in the Classroom

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Set in a small-town café-hotel during the German occupation of France in World War II, *'Allo 'Allo!* is a British sitcom first aired on the BBC almost 40 years ago (beginning in December 1982). An exceptional comedy, language use is at the core of the story. Non-English speaking French characters appear alongside German characters, Italian characters, monolingual British characters, and even British characters with terrible French—all portrayed in English with liberal smatterings of British double entendre, word play, and slapstick. A variety of “tricks” are needed to allow the audience to follow the combination of communication and incomprehension, including the use of accents, direct statements, repetition, and prior knowledge. Differences in both culture and historical understandings are emphasized in the comedy; for example, World War II is seen both with a British view and with an awareness that the French would have seen things otherwise. Exaggerated cultural stereotypes are also important for the story. A very “clean” program in many respects, it is also filled with playful sexual suggestiveness making it a very engaging program with multiple levels of understanding. With its clever use of accented English to indicate different languages and its funny story lines, *'Allo 'Allo!* could be a useful source of English in the EFL classroom or even self-study.

The plot seems at first glance to be entirely unpredictable; it is both very simple, and quite complex because of the long-running storyline, character development and multiple focusses. *'Allo 'Allo!* revolves around René, the owner of a café, who is reluctantly assisting the Gaullist resistance in their efforts to help British airmen escape to England. A coward at heart, he will actually help anyone who threatens to cause him a problem, including the communist resistance, or the occupying Axis forces. A number of German officers frequent the café, including the local commander Colonel von Strohm, his adjutant Captain Geering, and Lieutenant Gruber (a gay officer in a panzer division who is attracted to René).



Figure 1. René and the escaped British airmen disguised as onion sellers (Episode 1)

One major focus in the first few episodes is a stolen painting, *The Fallen Madonna with the Big Boobies* by a fictional painter, von Clomp. Initially, the Colonel is planning to keep it to sell after the war, and asks René to hide it. A Gestapo officer, Herr Flick, arrives from Berlin to retrieve the painting and take it to Hitler and so orders the Colonel to begin searching the town. A second focus is two British airmen who arrive in the first episode. The British airmen, then hidden in the café, are in danger of discovery, but Michelle of the Resistance hatches a plan to

use the uniforms of the Colonel and the Captain to help the airmen escape. The German officers are enticed to cooperate by being offered the special services of two of the waitresses, Yvette and Maria (both secretly mistresses of René). The airmen fail to escape and burn the stolen/borrowed uniforms, causing additional problems. Eventually, the Colonel agrees to allow the resistance to have England make a forgery (along with new uniforms, ironically made by Jewish tailors in London), but the original painting is then mistakenly given to Herr Flick. On the Colonel's orders, René tries to steal it back, but Herr Flick has made a copy as well (so he can sell the original). This painting and the ever-increasing number of forged copies reappear with another painting by van Gogh in later episodes.

This series—84 episodes over 9 seasons—provides rich material for research into British culture (especially of the 1980s), humor, code switching and a variety of other uses of language, sexuality in Britain, and historical understandings, to name a very few subjects. Reportedly, a stage play was performed by hundreds of professional and amateur troupes, further enriching the connection to British popular culture. Bringing together a range of perspectives on this series could enrich understanding of British culture and English language use. It can also be entertaining and potentially interesting to EFL students eager to learn about British language and culture.



Figure 2. The flamboyant Italian Captain Bertorelli indicating that General Eric von Klinkerhoffen is “bananas.”

One of the important characteristics of this series—much like other sitcoms—is the stable of regular characters who viewers can follow easily. The characters both help the audience follow the plot, and provide critical repetition. Many of these characters have quirks like Capt. Geering's response to “Heil Hitler,” “Klop!” in a high-pitched voice, or René's cowardice and inexplicable sexual attractiveness to French women. Most characters also have catchphrases for which they quickly come to be known.

Table 1: Major characters in the First Three Series

Name	Role	Characteristics
René Artois	Café owner, husband, lover, reluctant supporter of the resistance	Cannot speak English (accent varies), cowardly, overweight but attractive to many women
Edith Artois	Wife of café owner	Loves to sing but has an excruciating voice
Yvette Carte-Blanche	Waitress	The mistress of René, also a prostitute
Maria Recamier	Waitress	Unknown to Yvette, also a mistress of René, and a prostitute

Michelle Dubois	Resistance leader	Speaks with a “French accent” except when speaking English (with an RP accent)
Roger Le Clerc	Forger and resistance agent	A former lover of Edith’s mother, a forger and a messenger for Michelle
Col. Kurt von Strohm	Commander of the German garrison	A greedy, untrustworthy officer who wants to survive the war
Capt. Hans Geering	Adjutant to Col. von Strohm	A good natured adjutant
Lt. Hubert Gruber	A tank commander	Returned from the Russian front, attracted to René, and relatively open about his homosexuality.
Private Helga Geerhart	Secretary to the Colonel	Weak to those in power, a love interest for Otto Flick
Monsieur Alfonse	Undertaker	Lover of money, France and a suitor of Edith
Herr Otto Flick	Gestapo officer from Berlin	A vain, greedy man; no emotion
Flying Officer Fairfax	Shot down airman	Can’t speak French; a straight, dumb British soldier.
Flying officer Carstairs	Shot down airman	Can’t speak French; a straight, dumb British soldier.
Officer Crabtree	Policeman	A British agent masquerading as a French policeman; terrible French

***'Allo 'Allo!* as teaching material**

In recent decades, there has been a shift towards two related language teaching approaches, Content Based Instruction and more recently Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), both centered around content or subject matter thus requiring greater oral communication skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Nation and McAllister (2010) advocate use of Meaning Focused Input and suggest that it should be about a quarter of a well-balanced curriculum, video materials offer a good source of spoken input.

One great advantage of dramas is that they offer good examples of conversational language. Such examples of conversational English are also found in videos accompanying textbooks, which have English controlled to the ability of students. However, one big disadvantage is that production quality is often mediocre and the dialogue uninteresting. While comedies designed for a wider native-speaker audience may be a bit more difficult, they are much more engaging. The conversations are contrived by writers, but to be believable to native speakers, the conversations have to be plausible. In order to make them interesting, there are often multiple layers of meaning. Combined with humorous situations, this may motivate students to spend time watching and trying to understand. Students may also absorb whole blocks of language through repetition and repeated viewing, which is very important for second

language acquisition.

One way that video material can be made more accessible to second language learners is the use of subtitles. This is particularly true in the Japanese context, where a strong emphasis on written materials is helpful because students tend to be more proficient at reading English than at listening. It also allows students to focus on more than capturing “the correct words.” DVDs are one of the most efficient media. DVD player remote controls usually have buttons for the audio language channel and subtitle language. It is very easy for a learner to replay parts that they did not understand. They can also change the language, so that they can watch it in their L1, and once they understand what was said, watch it again in English. The DVDs used for this paper, however, have only English subtitles—reading in students’ L1 may not be possible, but this can actually have advantages (see below). The accuracy of the subtitling for these DVDs was also very good, at least in rendering of oral language into standard written English.

Online streaming services have become very popular, but unfortunately are not really suited to language learners. One well-known provider in Japan, for example, only offers Japanese subtitles, which are part of the video so they cannot be turned on or off, much like many VHS tapes of the 1980s. Another provider does allow users to change languages, but unfortunately, this can only be done by exiting the video, going into the settings, changing the language and then restarting the video. Another problem with online streaming services is that they offer different videos in each country, which can sometimes make it difficult to get the most useful or interesting programs. Region restrictions on DVDs imposed by movie production companies also have a powerful limiting affect. The only way to get around this is to use region-free DVD players, which are not always readily available from retail stores, but are commonly available online.

It is very important that subtitles be in the same L2 as the dialogue on the video. Subtitles in the L1 tend to distract L2 learners from listening to the dialogue; when both the sound and the subtitles are in the L2, they tend to support listening. This is because our brains are attuned to our first language, and so when we see it we tend to focus on it and block out any other language. This can be explained as being like a switch in our brains—when the sound and subtitles are both in the L2 then our brains switch to L2 mode, but when the subtitles are in the L1 then we switch back to L1 mode. One of the primary goals of second language teaching should be to train our students to be able to think and interact by means of the L2.

With subtitles, the entertaining snappy conversations provide a basis upon which L2 language learning can be effectively conducted, and a basis for discussions of language, culture and history, among other subjects.

Accents

One of the most distinctive features of *'Allo 'Allo!* is the use of accents to show that someone is speaking a different language. It is interesting to note that the French, Germans and Italians always understand each other, but they cannot understand the British airmen and vice versa. The French accents of Yvette and René seem to thicken when they are not able to

communicate with the British airmen (for example, see the appendix, where even René's grammar deteriorates — "I think he has the toothache."). That being said, in presenting this range of accents, the series could be particularly useful for learners of English for several reasons, including building linguistic awareness of non-standard accents, and social awareness of issues related to identity.

This series could help students to notice differences in both native speaker pronunciation and non-native speaker pronunciation. Developing an ability to understand the accents of non-native English speakers or native non-standard English speakers can be very important for students going on study abroad programs where they will probably have to interact with students who speak non-standard English dialects on a regular basis. Being prepared for such eventualities could help students to settle in to such a program more easily. It could also help them to develop an awareness of their own pronunciation and how they can militate some of the characteristics of their own foreign accent. It also could help them create a more welcoming international work environment in their future workplaces.

In terms of social development, examination of and understanding different accents can help students to develop a sense of how language can be an integral part of our identities. While some immigrants may wish to fully assimilate into the new social structure, some study-abroad students who intend to return to their home country within a relatively short space of time may be less inclined to discard that sense of identity. A speaker can signal to an interlocutor that they are a non-native speaker of the language with an accent, and thereby more easily obtain assistance in understanding what is being said. Nonetheless, many others may eagerly embrace a native accent and try to blend into the local culture. There are a range of choices available to a sophisticated learner.

This could also be a useful way to start a discussion of foreign accents and English speakers' perceptions. It is very common to stereotype other groups and this could be used to initiate a discussion of British stereotypes of foreigners and how this can be prejudicial, for example, British attitudes towards the French and Germans and Europe in general tend to be condescending. A prime example is the debate that preceded the referendum that resulted in Brexit, or Britain's exit from the European Union. These British stereotypes of foreigners and bigotry towards them are clearly represented in British comedies such as *Fawlty Towers*, *Yes Minister*, *Mind your language*, and of course *'Allo 'Allo!* In the character of René, we see the general British characterization of the French as being weak in times of war and having fairly flexible attitudes towards marital fidelity. As for the Germans, we see military officers who cannot stand up to powerful authorities such as Herr Flick of the Gestapo or the General; Helga thus often ends up in burlesque style lingerie. The Italian Captain Bertorelli and his men are portrayed as ill-disciplined and ineffective soldiers who are more interested in fancy uniforms and in womanizing. However, the British are not spared either, because the two British airmen are portrayed using received pronunciation, or upper-class English (even though the majority of RAF aircrew did not actually have this accent), and as being rather foolish, especially in the eyes of their French hosts. While it might be more difficult, issues of regional or class difference in speech could be addressed as well (Willis, 1981).

Catchphrases

Catchphrases occur repeatedly throughout the series, for example, in the dialogue below we see Michelle’s catchphrase “listen very carefully, I shall say this only once.” This is particularly amusing as often she is forced to repeat both this declaration and the information she wants to relate several times. Other examples include Officer Crabtree’s “good moaning,” Captain Bertorelli’s “What a mistake-a to make-a,” Roger Le Clerc’s “it is I, Le Clerc!,” and René’s misogynistic retort to his wife, “you stupid woman.” The catchphrases are often repeated to the point of becoming cliché—an important element of this series’ humor—but this is exactly what students need in order to learn the language.

Foreign language learners need multiple meaningful encounters with a word before they can start to acquire it, many studies suggest that at least seven meaningful encounters are necessary (Nation, 2013; O’Dell, 1997; Thornbury, 2002). Meaningful encounters are where the learner engages with an unknown or partially known vocabulary item and attempts to understand it (Nation, 2013). Appearing in familiar, but slightly varied contexts, and with slightly varied responses, these catchphrases constitute a form of formulaic language (Schmitt, 2004; Wood, 2010; Wray, 2002, 2008), and can help learners to get used to the idea that learning vocabulary is not just about learning individual words but also whole phrases. Having a good base of formulaic sequences can give beginning learners a useful boost in being able to use the language, and can help more advanced learners to use more native like language. Such an approach to vocabulary is the basis of some teaching methods, such as the lexical approach (Lewis, 1993, 1997). In a classroom it is important to do as Michelle does, not as she says!

Michelle ¹	Don’t move! My name is Michelle Dubois. Listen carefully, I shall say this only once.
René	I beg your pardon?
Michelle	I shall say this only once.
René	No, I didn’t quite catch your name.
Michelle	My name is Michelle Dubois. You are René Artois.
René	Well, I know that. I was....
Michelle	Sit down! Just listen.



Figure 3. Michelle of the Resistance

¹ A scene from the pilot episode, “The British Are Coming!” in which Michelle introduces herself and recruits a reluctant René to cooperate with the Resistance. Her irritation at being made to repeat herself is also quite characteristic, but finds form in many different reactions.

Officer Crabtree is particularly interesting because he is an Englishman who is trying to communicate using rather poor schoolboy French, or perhaps something even worse. This is done using very much the same stereotypical French accent as the French characters, but many of his statements contain transformed words, many of which result in double-entendres. According to Ajtony (2020) “the most frequent phonetic change is the vowel change, and the mispronounced words have either a nonsensical or a sexual or scatological connotation, and the humorous effect



Figure 4. Officer Crabtree

is induced by the displacement of the expected frame in the cognitive expectation of the audience” (Ajtony, 2020, p. 34). Some examples of his utterances are: “Good moaning. I am existed. Any chance of a cup of kifi?” [Good morning. I am exhausted. Any chance of a cup of coffee?] (ibid, p. 43), “The bums will be loaded on a bumper on a dick night and then they will be dripped over Ongland” [The bombs will be loaded on a bomber on a thick (dark) night and then they will be dropped over England] (ibid, p. 40). Officer Crabtree provides students with a superb example of how easily mispronunciations can lead to misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication.

The historical context

'Allo 'Allo! drew much of its inspiration from a BBC drama called *Secret Army*, which is about a Belgian café owner who joins the resistance and runs a section of a lifeline helping to get British aircrew out of occupied Europe and back to England. Both series are set during the German occupation of Europe during World War II. In Japan, this period may not be well understood by many Japanese students even at the university level, so some time maybe need to be set aside to explain the general historical situation. [Unfortunately, based on the knowledge of exchange students in Japan, this may be true elsewhere as well!] Beyond the general outline of the war and occupation, a range of issues present themselves, including the lack of awareness among the general French population of the “great French leader” de Gaulle and what he represented. *'Allo 'Allo!* could be used as a way to introduce discussion of collaboration during a military or colonial occupation, in a far less sensitive context than, for example, in Japanese controlled territories throughout Asia (Horton, 2015). It could also introduce issues related to occupation and resistance, in particular the question of when is it okay to defy the rule of law (in order to overthrow an oppressive regime), still very much an important issue in many parts of the world. In both series, the main character collaborates with the occupying Germans in order to resist and eventually contribute to their defeat. This raises all kinds of moral issues that could lead to interesting debates in class. All these discussions are best done as part of EFL “content classes” rather than a standard history course, which would require use of more directly related materials which are likely to trigger reactions before the issues can be addressed.

Another possible set of topics for discussion or debate relates to homosexuality, introduced by Lieutenant Gruber and his unrequited infatuation with René. Due to social stigma it seems to have been difficult for him to fully express his feelings, even though his orientation is very clear to everyone. While René does not reciprocate Gruber's feelings, he is fully aware of them, and sometimes uses the lieutenant's feelings to manipulate him into helping the resistance with various plots. Stigmatization of homosexuals is also raised through Captain Bertorelli who makes his fear of Lt. Gruber very clear. However, most obvious is the decision of the script writers to deploy a homosexual character to allow a long series of jokes about homosexuality. One example follows René's execution by Lt. Gruber and the appearance of René's "twin brother" René, who claimed to be from Nancy, René stated to Lt. Gruber that both he and his brother were "Nancy-boys," an accidental reference to effeminate male homosexuals. There is a range of material which could be utilized by students, who would gradually develop a wider range of cultural knowledge, while considering various knotty issues.

Intercultural Communication Problems

'Allo 'Allo! is filled with miscommunication, which functions as a source of humor, but it also can provide examples of problems of communication, and allows students to try imagining potential ways to avoid such mis-communications. In a critical scene in the pilot episode where the British airmen arrive, Yvette and René are able to figure out from context and the incomprehensible English that the two men outside the window are the escaped airmen.² Their efforts to communicate with the airmen fail miserably. First, René's pointing at his watch to emphasize "too early" was interpreted as a demand for their watches. This led to an entire chain of mistaken thoughts: "Having left the British stranded at Dunkirk," the French were not to be trusted, and the watches must have been demanded as the price to enter the building, then the price to get food. Meanwhile, the French concluded the gift of watches was an expression of appreciation for the French efforts at fighting the Germans at Dunkirk "when the British ran away." When the British tried to demand food, the French assumed the airman had a toothache, and so was told there was no doctor. The British assumed this meant that they would not be given food. Finally, they were given a pliers, which further mystified them.

The power of expressions and sounds to miscommunicate is conveyed powerfully in humor. However, the facial expressions still give the viewer indications that all is not well, which offers one opening for possible engagement with this scene by students considering intercultural communication. Beyond analysis and consideration of communicative solutions, role playing can provide a further means of engaging with the cultural miscommunication, and improvement of communication skills.

² See the Appendix for a partial transcript of this scene.

Conclusion

At the time of its release *'Allo 'Allo!* was a very popular comedy series which ran for nine seasons and two special episodes and numerous reruns, not only in Britain, but also in many other countries. The keys to its success were the quality of its writing and the clever way in which accent was used to show the use of different languages in the dialogue. The slapstick comedy that was involved adds to the entertainment of the series. Such a highly entertaining program could help motivate students to watch the series and thereby improve their English. Although the PG rating for sexual innuendos requires due consideration by instructors, both as a tool and a potential problem, *'Allo 'Allo!* is highly suited to use in the EFL classroom or for self-study.

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Appendix: Text of one scene from the pilot episode (“The British are Coming!”)

Yvette René, have you told your wife about us yet?
René No. No, we must wait until the war is over.
Yvette But the war might go on forever.
René No. No, no, the British will set us free one day. It may take years,
 but they will come.
 [knock, knock]
Airmen Helleu? Helleu?
 [Yvette goes to the window, briefly opens the curtains]
Airmen Helleu!
 [Yvette closes curtains]
Yvette The British, they are here!
René What?!
 [René goes to the window, opens the curtain and the window.]
René Well, yes, but it will take more than two before I tell the wife....
Fairfax Are you expecting us by any chance?
René What does he say?
Yvette I don't know. I don't speak English.
René Neither do I.
Airman We wish to talk to Monsieur Rene.
René Ah, René! **[Points at self]**
Fairfax Ah, ah! We, we British come from the sky **[points up]**, shot down
[points down]. Ahahahahaha! British **[sings God Save Our Gracious King**
while saluting then holds up their onions]
Yvette Ah, I have it! They are the airmen. But they are two days too
 soon!
René You are two days too soon.
Fairfax What's he saying?

Carstairs I don't know. I never understood a word of the language.

René You **[points with both hands]** are two days **[holds up 2 fingers]** too soon **[taps watch violently]**. Too soon!

Carstairs What's he say?

Fairfax I think he wants your watch before he lets us in.

Carstairs Surely not.

René Too soon!

Fairfax You better give it to him. We can't stand out here forever.

Carstairs Grasping French twit! **[takes off watch]** They left us absolutely stranded at Dunkirk, you know! If we have to give him a watch to get us through the window, God knows what he'll want before we get food.

[hands René his watch]

René **[Looking puzzled, turns to Yvette]** Why has he given me his watch?

Yvette Maybe the British are grateful because we fought the Germans while they ran away at Dunkirk. You had best keep it, they might be offended.

René Thank you! **[puts it in pocket]**

Carstairs Look, he's pocketing the damn thing!

Fairfax What did I tell you.

[both step inside]

René I don't want them here. This place is crawling with Germans.

[laughs nervously] What am I going to do with them?

Yvette We must hide them until we talk to Michelle.

René "Hide them," she says. Where am I going to hide them?

Fairfax What are they talking about?

Carstairs I don't know. Perhaps they're thinking of some way to get your watch. I don't know about you, but I'm damn peckish. Me hungry. **[points at mouth and bites violently]** Hungry, ngah ngah!!!

Yvette What is wrong with him?

René I think he has the toothache.

Yvette We can't risk taking them to a dentist.

René No, no. Aaaah aaaah! **[points at mouth]** No dentist! **[Makes negative sign with arms]**

Carstairs That's definite enough, no food. Told you he wanted the watch.

[Fairfax removes his watch and hands it to René]

Carstairs Here you are, you mercenary frog!

René Thank you!

Carstairs **[points to mouth]** ngah, ngah, ngah!!

René Ah! **[points and indicates he understands; hand them a pliers, then point at his own mouth]** Ngah, ngah, ngah!!

Fairfax What do you make of that?

Carstairs Perhaps we're getting sardines.