

I. ARTICLES

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Reality TV shows and empathy in the EFL classroom¹

ABSTRACT. The aim of this study is to explore the extent to which reality TV shows, such as the *X Factor*, can be effective and emotionally engaging resources in the EFL classroom, particularly for teenagers. Such TV formats, especially the sections in which contestants narrate their personal experiences, have the potential to engage viewers in a powerfully emotional way. Similarly, when used as teaching resources, these first-person discourses are capable of challenging students' empathy very directly, triggering emotionally charged responses to the expressions of others. Thus, under examination here will be the potential value in language teaching and learning of reality TV talent shows and the empathy they produce in students.

KEYWORDS: Reality TV, empathy, EFL teaching and learning, *X Factor*, emotions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Internet has had a considerable effect on foreign language (FL) education, with a large and more varied array of resources now easily available to both students and teachers. Among EFL learners, teenagers are those characterized by the most natural orientation towards Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in formal and informal learning contexts (Szyszka 2015: 4). The aim of this article is to focus on one

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area of the Internet in terms of its potential for language teaching to adolescents, particularly, TV reality programmes on the websites of broadcasting networks and on video-sharing platforms like *Youtube*. Some studies have noted the special appeal that such TV shows have among young audiences (aged 14–26) (Hill 2007: 66; Helms 2005: 46). In a survey on young audiences of these programmes, one of most valued shows was the *X Factor*, as opposed to reality programmes like *Big Brother*, which were often seen as ‘trash’ and ugly forms of reality TV (Hill 2007: 104).

The *X Factor* is a reality show for singers. It was aired first in the UK in 2004, and remains popular today with few variations in the format, having been exported to 40 countries around the world. Similar, rival shows have also enjoyed success, including *Pop Idol* and *The Voice*, further underlining the appeal of the genre. This can be seen as a consequence of cultural globalization, one effect of which has been the proliferation of standardized TV formats for a range of different audiences in diverse territories (O’Connor 2012; de Bruin & Zwaan 2012). Most of the features of such TV reality shows, regarding both their content and their form, are designed to engage as many viewers as possible, in a sector of the broadcast media where obtaining the highest revenues for the lowest production costs is fundamental. With this in mind, the way in which the audience’s interest is attracted and maintained is not only through the contestants’ singing abilities, but also by means of the public exposure of their personal experiences. As might be expected, those viewing such programmes often react in emotionally charged ways to these frequently shocking accounts.

Language students, when viewing scenes coming from such shows, will also typically feel affectively engaged, and this offers great potential in facilitating their learning processes. Among the emotions that can affect FL students in their learning processes, this study will concentrate on empathy, given that such TV formats offer the audience a form of realistic representation, in which spectators assume that they are viewing people who are broadly similar to themselves and who are experiencing familiar situations and emotions (Dovey 2000: 6). As Day argues, “We empathise with them in a way we never normally engage with actors or celebrities precisely because they are real and because – at the touch of an interactive red button or the dialling of a phone number – we can have a say in their future” (2010: n.p.).

2. WHAT IS REALITY TV? THE *X FACTOR*

Dovey (2000) provides a general definition of reality TV shows in three stages:

- a) recording events of the life or lives of an individual or group,
- b) dramatized reconstruction of these events,
- c) packaging of the material in a TV format.

However, Hill posits that:

there is no one definition of reality programming, but many [...] because the reality genre is made of a number of distinctive and historically based television genres, such as lifestyle, or documentary. These television genres have merged with each other to create a number of hybrid genres that we now call reality TV (2005: 55).

The *X Factor*, together with other similar music talent shows, clearly shares this hybrid nature, as Turner (2004: 57–58) notes: “First, there is a search for talent section, in which the judges audition many contestants looking for genuinely talented singers”. There is also a game show-like process in which a winner emerges. Soap-style narrative structures the programme, as the show offers a certain amount of sentimental back-story for the higher-profile contestants. This human-interest section has become central to such shows (Hill 2005: 16). Finally, the glamorous world of lifestyle or make-over reality TV is also present, with contestants being taught how to behave like celebrities, in their dress and use of make-up, for example.

Nevertheless, each show has to provide the audience with some specific features to make it more appealing than other shows on the market. In this regard, whereas music talent shows usually share a similar format (De Bruin & Zwaan 2012: 1), the *X Factor* includes a specific arrangement of different stages, one which its producers describe as a journey the viewers are taken on (Day 2010: n.p.).

The first stage involves open nationwide auditions. The 2017 auditions, for example, are announced on the show’s official web page with this telling note of caution: “The *X Factor* team is ready to hit the road on a nationwide tour in search of the next big breakout music stars to join this ever growing hall of fame”². Those who pass this initial selection will then audition in front of the four judges in a room or arena. Some of these auditions are subsequently broadcasted during episodes of the show, featuring not only the best contestants but also some of the worst, with the *X Factor* being the first show to exploit failed contestants for purposes of entertainment. As Hackley, Brown and Hackley have stated:

This freak show element attracts criticism for presenting the caterwauling performances of the deeply deluded as comic entertainment. Yet the car crash audi-

² *The X Factor*. ITV. <http://www.itv.com/xfactor> [28.01.2017].

tions also serve a dramatic purpose, since they offer a stark contrast which accentuates the talent that improbably emerges from this primeval sludge of solipsistic ego and tone-deaf ambition (2012: 453).

The next phase is a boot camp, where contestants stay for various days and sing in small groups in front of the judges. At this stage, some participants are dismissed, and those that survive continue to the six-chair challenge. Here contestants are placed in four different categories: girls, boys, over 25s and groups, and each of them is mentored by one of the judges. During this stage, contestants sing again and their mentor chooses the best singers, placing them in six chairs. However, because there are more contestants than chairs, the most thrilling part of the phase occurs when some of the contestants have to vacate their chairs, with the mentor giving them to other contestants.

In the following stage, the four groups of six candidates are taken by their mentors to spectacular locations, usually impressively luxurious houses, far away from their hometowns, so that they can experience, albeit for a short time, the glamorous lifestyle they can attain if they win the contest and become music stars. Following more performances by the contestants, three candidates from each group are eliminated. The remaining three will participate in live shows. At this final stage, which is back in the UK, all remaining participants live together in one house, where they rehearse and prepare for their weekly live performances. During the show itself, the judges vote alongside the TV audience (via telephone, messages and mobile apps). In each of these live stages, the contestant who obtains fewest votes is eliminated and leaves the show. Apart from the live performances, the experiences of the finalists during this period are filmed and narrated during the show, and also on other, related programmes. For example, a kind of extra show, the *Xtra Factor*, is broadcasted during the week and also after the show, and includes additional information about the contestants' rehearsals and other circumstances, focussing in particular on news and gossip about the group. After various live shows and the successive dismissal of each week's loser, in the final show the winner emerges, to be given a recording contract.

Notwithstanding the great success of this TV talent show, with an audience between 7 and 14 million of viewers in the UK, it has been the subject of much controversy and criticism from viewers and also from the tabloid press. The *X Factor* has been accused of cheating, of being unfair with some of the contestants, and even of voting irregularities (Welsh 2007). Similarly, in academic circles this type of reality shows has been condemned as a part of the expansion of the global neo-liberal agenda (Davy 2000: 12; O'Connor

2012: 569), and also as promoting the “postmodern culture of the copy”, or “karaoke capitalism” (Hackley, Brown & Hackley 2012: 457). However, the creator of this and other similar TV products, Simon Cowell, has also been recognised as having successfully “transformed a failing and disillusioned industry (the post-download music business) into a veritable fountain of gold discs (and all manner of ancillary merchandise)” (Hackley et al. 2012: 458).

3. EMPATHY AND EFL TEACHING AND LEARNING

From the 1980s and 1990s onwards, academic research has increasingly recognised the presence and relevance of affect and emotions as an element in the analysis of many disciplines, a tendency which has been referred to as the “affective turn” (Clough & Halley 2007). In the field of education, this period has also been notable for the emergence of new methodologies which have focussed on students’ welfare and emotional states as a means of achieving better results. This is also the case with FL teaching and learning, in which student-centred approaches and the so-called humanistic methods, including the Silent Way, Community Language Learning, the Natural Way, and more recently, Multiple Intelligences, emphasise human values such as sensitivity, feelings and emotions, the way learning takes place, as well as the classroom environment (Richards & Rodgers 2014: 32–33). Numerous studies have demonstrated that emotions can positively affect students’ engagement when learning a FL, e.g., Horwitz (1995), Arnold and Brown (1999), Aragão (2011), Dewaele (2011; 2015). As Horwitz (1995: 576–577) notes, FL learning depends on learners’ emotional readiness, which can be fostered by the teacher. However, to admit that this emotional side is instrumental in the teaching and learning process is not enough, and it is also necessary to address the specific emotions that students experience during this process (Dewaele 2011: 23).

Among these emotions, one area of interest has been empathy (Brown 1973; Dewaele & Wei 2012; Olivares-Cuhat 2012), defined as the capacity to put oneself in someone else’s situation. Social psychologists also distinguish between cognitive and emotional empathy. The former measures the appreciation of affective states, that is, whether a person is able to understand someone else’s perspective; emotional empathy, meanwhile, refers to an emotional reaction in response to another person’s affective state or feelings (Dewaele & Wei 2012: 7; Olivares-Cuhat 2012: 63).

One of the first scholars to examine the influence of empathy in FL learning was H. Douglas Brown. Already in 1973, he included empathy among

the social variables which can affect this process, along with variables such as students' egocentric factors and cognitive styles (Brown 1973: 231). Without determining whether empathy is a human basic disposition or something that can be learnt, Brown considered that teachers should incorporate this issue into the classroom, so that all students can benefit from it (Brown 1973: 236). He also mentioned some methods and techniques that can be used to enhance empathy, including role-playing and group working (Brown 1973: 236). Dewaele and Wei's (2012: 5) review of research on empathy and FL learning shows the importance of empathy when imitating native speakers and how empathy fosters accuracy in FL performance. Indeed, Guiora, Brannon and Dull (1972) have shown that empathy is positively related to the ability to accurately pronounce a FL. Hence, these assertions seem to constitute a clear invitation to use authentic materials in the EFL classroom as a means of enhancing oral reception and production. In this regard, role plays and experiences of authentic communication are particularly effective, not only in terms of their potential for teaching and learning, but also to promote students' understanding and communicating of emotions (Dewaele 2011: 36).

4. EMPATHY AND THE *X FACTOR* AUDITIONS

This study will focus on the *X Factor* room or arena auditions, since this and other similar formats usually include autobiographical discourses about contestants' past experiences which take the form of confessions or testimonies (Foucault 1990; Matheson 2005; Dovey 2000). Sometimes a shocking or emotionally critical moment in a participant's life is the focus here, which easily elicits the desired empathic response from the audience (Wood & Skeggs 2011: 95), an emotional experience which in musical talent shows is further heightened by the messages conveyed in the songs performed by participants. In this regard, the historian Dominic Sandbrook maintains that:

reality TV is merely a manifestation of a very, very old craving that we have for imposing narratives [on events]. We love sentimental stories, such as Dickens and Little Nell; we love a tear jerker, and I don't think shows like the *X Factor* are any more crass or exploitative than those 19th-century penny dreadfuls (after Day 2010: n.p.).

Personal experiences are generally engaging and attractive for an audience, who can identify easily with such discourse types. The particular hold that these discourses have is also closely connected to their emotional nature, because people, in telling their stories, tend to evoke and recreate past

episodes and relive the emotions in question (Mateos Blanco 2009: 148). Additionally, as Anderson (2011: 114) notes, contemporary culture is obsessed with “personality and self-exposure”, and hence “the rise of memoir writing from the 1990s onwards has to be contemplated alongside contemporary developments in other popular documentary forms such as reality TV”. Indeed, given the increasing presence of personal experiences in this type of TV and in other media, Dovey (2000) has spoken about our current first-person media era. Day (2010: n.p.) reaffirms this, adding that “If we are already sharing the details of our private lives in Tweets and status updates, are we also becoming more accustomed to the notion of putting our intimate selves on display for the entertainment of others?”, which is a compulsory component of reality TV.

In these TV programmes spectators assume that contestants or participants are playing themselves, and thus they enjoy experiencing someone else’s stories, which might to some extent reflect their own (Helms 2005: 47). Bazalgette, the former creative director of Endemol Company, which brought *Big Brother* to the UK, points out that in fact this is the most powerful aspect of reality TV:

The average show takes members of the public and sends them on a journey. We love to follow that because it’s a cracking story which engages our emotion. It’s not unlike a soap opera, except that these are real people and you get to vote them out one by one. That simple premise dominates everything from *Britain’s Got Talent* to *Big Brother* and *The Apprentice*. What it creates is an extraordinarily powerful story arc where we get involved in the characters. That’s why we watch it (after Day 2010: n.p.).

The auditions of the *X Factor* are useful for our educational purposes because of the very structure of the programme, which is a concatenation of short segments. Each of the segments – the auditions – lasts around six or seven minutes and has a similar structure: The contestant appears in the room or on stage and introduces himself or herself, and then one of the judges asks appropriate questions so as to elicit the retelling of the key personal experience. With high-profile contestants, this narrative is more overtly developed, with footage recorded in advance, in which the audience can see the contestant speaking while they are waiting to perform, or even at home or in their workplace. The reporting of the back-story here is of value in that it usually involves a highly emotional event (Matheson 2005: 88) and is sometimes endorsed by the words of a relative or close friend. The contestant then sings the song and the audience reacts to the performance. Finally, the judges pronounce the yes or no verdict.

In this section of the show, the crucial role of the editing of the programme is clear, in terms of the way in which these personal experiences are arranged as a means of orientating and manipulating the emotional response of the audience (Day 2010: n.p.). Reality TV would have significantly less impact and power without this special feature. As Bazalgette explains:

Reality television is a completely constructed premise. None of the people would be in it if we were just showing their normal lives. But what it does do is take human flesh and blood and challenges it in situations that bring out a person's true personality. So what flows from this constructed premise is extremely real. That's why shows work, because the public is after authenticity... (Day 2010: n.p.).

During the UK version of the *X Factor* 2012, when the winner of that season, James Arthur, was introduced in the auditions, the audience were able to listen to his first-person account of the dysfunctional family circumstances of his childhood and his own reactions to this. This was shown as part of the scene in which he appeared to be waiting with other contestants to perform at the auditions³. However, the editing is obvious, in that there are also scenes recorded at James's home, which he describes in his narrative:

My name is James Arthur. I'm 24. I'm from Middlesbrough. I live in a flat. It isn't the Ritz, more like a bedsit than a flat. My mum and dad split up when I was very young. The difficult thing for me was the fact that my mum and dad didn't have any sort of relationship for my entire life [...] I used to get, you know, suspended, thrown out. I ended up like sleeping roofs sometime [...] I didn't want to get involved in hearing them arguing any more [...] I just wanted to get away [...]

His mother also participates, giving her own point of view and clearly regretting events. Her repentance is palpable and is underlined by the tears visible in her eyes: "There's times I've listened to his music and the lyrics...I feel, you know, have I done enough, did I do enough?" James's introduction and narrative is thus a telling example of "the genre's emphasis upon exposing modes of behaviour and ways of life" with the clear purpose of advising, indeed moralising, the audience as to how they should live (Wood & Skeggs 2011: 96). After listening to the words of both James and his mother, it is evident that the show is framing the family circumstances in terms of the parents' negative role, and that this is presented as the root of James's reprehensible actions earlier in life. The song performed by James,

³ *YouTube. The X Factor UK. James Arthur's audition - Tulisa's Young. Published 25th August, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFoFtIqvkGE> [30.06.2015].*

a version of Tulisa's *Forever Young*, is closely related to the topic and implicitly conveys a similar message: "I made a lot of mistakes in my past / But I refuse to live there, no! / I saw a lot of heart breakings in the past / But I refuse to go there, it hurts too much / I say forgive us for what we have done / We're young, we're young, we're young".

The message, then, is that children are still too young to understand and cope with the full complications of life. The programme might in this sense be seen as aligning itself with numerous government initiatives towards better parenting, sometimes known as "parenting academy", addressed primarily at those socially disadvantaged groups which are sometimes considered not to be capable of acting as responsible parents (Wood & Skeggs 2011: 104, Gillies 2005: 838). The song is performed with a high degree of emotion by James and provokes the required reaction from the judges and audience, which is underlined during the performance by the use of close-ups of various spectators in situ, of James's family members, and of the judges' overwhelmed faces. Following the song, the judges give voice to this reaction, and produce the right message: "From today on your life is totally going to change", "You inspired me and that's because you set on that stage and you bared your soul to us" - messages which are intensified by a moving sound track.

The transformational power of the show is also very evident in these auditions. This occurs with James, who explains what music means to him: "Initially music was a coping mechanism [...] One day I had just to go, stop behaving like a child and grow up [...] Today is the first time my mum and dad have been together in 22 years [...] Today could change anything [...]". Indeed, the insistence on this topic is a commonplace with the programme, that is, that the contestants can change their lives through their performances. Most of them repeat this sentence or something similar to camera, thus turning the message into the leitmotif of the show. Thus, Lola Saunder's audition during the UK edition of *X Factor* 2014 also plays heavily on this idea⁴. Just before her audition, while she tells her story in the first person, TV spectators are shown footage of Lola working as a fishmonger. As she explains: "I don't want ever to be a full time job, I'm desperate to be a singer". In this case, Lola's grandparents are the family members who add credence to her words by saying how proud they are of their granddaughter, providing a very emotional discourse with constant tear-spilling moments. Lola ends up by stating that this is the biggest moment of her whole life, predicting that her participation in the show is going to change her life.

⁴ *YouTube*. The X Factor 2014 Auditions - Lola Saunders. Published 6th September, 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMPs2kN89dI> [30.06.2015].

As a musical TV programme, many of these first-person narratives deal with the power of music to help people who have undergone difficult life experiences. Music and singing are in this way seen as having a healing effect, functioning as a cure or therapy for those who have suffered damaging episodes in their life, as happened with James Arthur. In the case of Katie Coleman, in the 2015 auditions, she narrates how, like many other girls, she has been left heartbroken by a failed romance, and how painful it is⁵. The notes on the official *Youtube* channel of the show guide the audience towards the expected response to the video: “21-year old singer Katie from Darlington was left heartbroken by an ex, but can she channel her emotions and wow the Judges with her rendition of Ariana Grande’s *Break Free*?” Katie’s selection of the song clearly emphasises the fact that she does not want to have the same experience again, and thus the song has particular significance for her. As the chorus tellingly says: “This is the part when I say I don’t want ya / I’m stronger than I’ve been before / This is the part when I break free / ‘Cause I can’t resist it no more”.

As a final illustration of the *X Factor* auditions, let us turn to Josh Daniel, who also participated in the 2015 edition of the UK show. His video on *YouTube* is introduced with these words: “21-year old car mechanic Josh Daniel’s mum might be his No.1 fan, but will the Judges love his emotional rendition of Labrinth’s track *Jealous* enough to give him a yes?” The final remark is particularly meaningful for this study: “WARNING! This one is a tear-jerker”⁶. Simon Cowell is the judge in charge of asking the appropriate questions, prompting Josh to give details about his personal life, in particular why he has chosen this song:

I lost my best friend a couple of years ago and I kind of interpret the lyrics in a complete different way [...] He was eighteen at that time and we were really, really close. We did everything together [...] The lyrics kind of say I’m jealous that you’re happy without me and I kind of say it in the sense that I’m jealous that he is happy in heaven now that he has moved to a better place and so, but I can’t still be without him.

Viewers can witness the emotionally charged performance of the contestant, which is likely to provoke a tearful response, and if this is not sufficient, the cameras focus on some of the spectators in situ, who are in fact crying, and also on Simon Cowell, known to be the toughest judge, who is also deeply moved and is not capable of speaking at the end of the perfor-

⁵ *YouTube. The X Factor UK*. Katie Coleman makes Grimmy’s heart feel funny. Auditions Week 3. Published 13th September, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNx2SGiKYdw> [20.09.2015].

⁶ *YouTube. The X Factor UK*. Josh Daniel sings Labrinth’s *Jealous*. Auditions Week 1. Published 30th August, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ra_iiSl4OI&t=409s [20.09.2015].

mance. As Day (2010: n.p.) argues, through such discourse and techniques the show achieves its goal of creating a tight bond with the audience. Viewers are moved to the point that 45% cry at the contestants' stories, 39% feel that "anything is possible", and 30% are depressed when the show finishes.

Empathy, however, is a problematical area, and several recent studies have raised controversial questions here, as can be observed in their corresponding reviews in the press. For example, the psychologist Paul Bloom in his book *Against empathy: The case for rational compassion* (2017) claims that empathy is an overestimated concept, an observation reflected in other studies, in which its apparently ubiquitous presence in our culture has been noted (after Vickers 2017). Peter Bazalgette, in *The empathy instinct. How to create a more civil society* (2017), voices concerns about the perceptible decline of empathy in our digital era, and argues for the need to create emotional bonds among individuals to improve our societies (after Leith 2017).

5. TEACHING POTENTIALITY

All the above-discussed features of reality TV shows, and the empathy they seek to generate in viewers, offer great potential in the area of FL teaching. My aim in this section is to propose the use of these TV sequences, in particular the *X Factor* individual auditions, in the teenage EFL classroom. First, students are more motivated when using authentic material, in that they are watching a real TV show, one which is likely to be familiar to them and which they probably enjoy (Canning-Wilson 2000; Lefstein & Snell 2014: 81). Besides, learners' empathic responsiveness are challenged by listening to first-person experiences of young people similar to themselves, at least in terms of age. In our chaotic and fragmented society, viewers can thus easily feel themselves to be part of a larger community of viewers or spectators, all engaged in experiencing the same emotions. This indeed is a key aspect in the appeal of the *X Factor*: "the idea that we want to form an empathetic bond with contestants and feel part of an extended social network" (Day 2010: n.p.). Additionally, experiences like witnessing the contestants' first-person narratives might act as "spurs to self-understanding, self-improvement, and self-healing" for teenagers who are themselves in a somewhat difficult period of their lives, just as autobiographical texts are used by therapists to give comfort to people in challenging circumstances (Smith & Watson 2010: 231). The auditions also include the songs performed by contestants, which are also highly motivating, in that music is a powerful stimulus for student engagement (Harmer 2015: 357). Most importantly, as mentioned above, when students' emotional sensibilities respond to the emotive expressions of others, the language learning process is greatly facilitated.

Studies looking at the effect of exploiting audio-visual technologies in the EFL classroom have tended to conclude that such resources increase students' listening comprehension (Weyers 1999; Gruba 2006). As we know, listening comprehension is a complex classroom practice and EFL teachers should be able to offer their students as large a range of different activities as possible (Ur 2006: 33), and obviously these should be as interesting and motivating in nature as possible. Additionally, students get to see "language in use", and thus can observe paralinguistic features, such as gestures and other body movements (Harmer 2015: 343). Finally, thanks to their cultural and linguistic references, using media for teaching purposes makes these resources "the equivalent of a portable immersion experience" (Siddell 2011: 43) for those who are geographically removed from the English-speaking world. In this case, EFL teachers can counter the lack of authentic interactions by means of these highly emotional discourses, given that vocabulary or even face expressions and other paralinguistic elements might vary among languages and cultures (Daeweile 2011: 35).

Researchers have also shown how ICT technologies can help to improve students' performance in productive skills (Hanley, Herron & Cole 1995). In addition, it has been claimed that such resources are powerful tools for implementing cultural diversity and intercultural awareness in EFL education (Cortés 2000). In the case here, the *X Factor* auditions can be used as preparation and stimulus for language production (Harmer 2015: 299). Another highly motivating possibility would be to use this TV show as the initial idea for a student project (Gallacher 2004), one in which students create their own *X Factor* in the classroom. As with the participants in the programme itself, students could relate or invent an autobiographical account, preferably one with an exceptional or shocking experience, and choose a song which communicates a related message. They could prepare their own contributions as written texts and then produce and record their own TV show, taking the part of their own character in the performance of this.

Moving a step further, the *X Factor* could also be useful as the basis for interpretative and evaluative debating, that is, for study and discussion with older students with a higher command of the English language, since in this way they would be challenged to perceive and appreciate more implicit types of information and messages while listening (Ur 2006: 164). This is an excellent means of enhancing students' critical thinking, and also of implementing and developing the rules of logic and reasoning. In this case, using small discussion groups with the teacher as a moderator, TV programmes like this can be watched in the classroom and then analysed in depth. For instance, it would be particularly interesting to look specifically at empathy and emotional responsiveness in the audio-visual media, and to assess how

they are boosted through diverse editing techniques, including first-person confessional and testimonial discourses, teary-eyed sentimentality, moving sound tracks, camera angles, and close-ups (Rothe 2011: 97). Similarly, by means of such debates and discussion groups, students' intercultural awareness might also be challenged, since in these TV talent shows they are presented with explicit examples of differences (Banks 2016: 262), not only with respect to their own culture, but also because the *X Factor* and other similar programmes, although set in a particular country, the UK in this case, provide instances of people from different cultural backgrounds and experiences.

6. CONCLUSIONS

It is undeniable that TV shows like *X Factor* form part of a recent global trend in TV programming, one which displays people's private lives as the audience's possession, and in which instead of empathising with the contestants, viewers often want to feel the power of judging them and of sending them home. Reality TV of this kind has also been seen as one of the most widespread instruments in the extension of the global neo-liberal agenda. Yet in terms of public appeal, their potential is unquestionable, attracting huge TV audiences, so why not using the *X Factor* for teaching purposes, given that its power to engage is so pervasive? Motivation is one of the necessary allies of any EFL teacher, and this study has discussed several reasons why reality talent shows like the *X Factor* might be motivating and attractive for students. Similarly, research in the field has shown the empathic power of reality TV shows and how viewers see themselves as part of a larger community of people who are sharing the same feelings, particularly when watching real people narrating their personal experiences, which are often similar to their own. Most importantly, empathy has been seen as one of the emotional factors in enhancing the EFL teaching and learning process. Bringing reality TV shows and empathy to the EFL classrooms has the potential to create new opportunities for the development of critical thinking skills among students, which might counteract the possible negative effects of this type of TV programmes.

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