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Using DVD feature films in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

DVD has vastly replaced traditional VHS as the movie medium of the new millennium. In addition to its compactness, duality and availability, there are a variety of special features offered on DVD, including interactive menus, theatrical trailer, behind the scenes commentary, language and subtitles and immediate scene access. With these special features, DVD films provide more pedagogical options and are a rich resource of intrinsically motivating materials for learners. This paper starts off by discussing film-viewing approaches, and then assessing the use of captioned and non-captioned films with different level learners. Finally, selection criteria for choosing appropriate films to promote active viewing and engage involvement for making the most of DVD films are provided.

Introduction

When commercially available video series, explicitly designed for ESL/EFL, were first utilized in the classroom, student response was positive. Video is a much more dynamic medium than a static text or a sound-only recording. Nevertheless, within a relatively short time span, student interest in video as a teaching mode waned. Watching the same few video actors and actress appear in episode after episode became a dull and uninspiring routine for most learners. Such teaching videos are intended to keep students busy by eliciting specific responses or answers from what they watch; this is done in ways that require students to *analyze* numerous details of language consciously, rather than *absorb* language and get the general gist of what is said.

Learning English through film viewing represents a novel approach for some students whose preconceived notion of learning English is based on their past learning experiences. For the most part such experiences

are primarily textbook-oriented and test-driven, with the focus on form rather than meaning and accuracy rather than communication. Such standard teaching materials lack a realistic and meaningful context and fail to deal with contemporary issues that are relevant to their lives. For such students, "English has few moorings in the social nature of communication. Language study is more than anchored in a berth of alienating frustration" (Shea, 1995:3). With training limited to numerous grammar exercises and tests designed to analyze the fine points of English, students still struggle in comprehending the main ideas in listening and reading. Some learners want to understand exactly what is said or written, which contradicts the listening strategies used by effective language learners: give their best guesses, follow their hunches, endure ambiguity, and absorb the language input. Learning English by use of films compensates for all the shortcomings in the EFL learning experience by bringing language to life. It is a refreshing learning experience for students who need to take a break from rote learning of endless English vocabulary and drill practices, and replace it with something realistic, a dimension that is missing in textbook-oriented teaching.

Feature films are more intrinsically motivating than videos made for EFL/ESL teaching because they embody the notion that "a film with a story that wants to be told rather than a lesson that needs to be taught" (Ward & Lepeintre, 1996). Moreover, the realism of movies provides a wealth of contextualized linguistic, paralinguistic and authentic cross-cultural information, classroom listening comprehension and fluency practice (Braddock, 1996; Mejia, 1994; Stempleski, 2000, Wood, 1995). Films are such valuable and rich resources for teaching for they present colloquial English in real life contexts rather than artificial situations; an opportunity of being exposed to different native speaker voices, slang, reduced speeches, stress, accents, and dialects.

Making the Most of the Film Medium

The use and feasibility of feature films in the classroom have inevitably evoked controversy among classroom teachers who have a curriculum to follow and limited time to allocate. Since some teachers still view movies as a medium of *entertainment* that has no place in a pedagogic setting, or, at most, as only outside classroom assignments or as a treat.

Films offer endless opportunities for pedagogically sound activities for developing fluency. The key to using films effectively mainly lies in the

teacher's ability in preparing students to receive the film's message. Many teachers have provided creative ideas with different purposes for enhancing active viewing (Davis, 1998; Ryan, 1998; Donley, 2000; Holden, 2000; Fox, 1999; Lin, 2000; King 2001). Some teachers use viewing sheets consisting of simple multiple-choice questions to promote fluency, rather than use many new lexical items or idioms to divert the focus from fluency. Other teachers integrate film response journals into lessons, or use the whole-movie approach based on a response-based engagement with opinions and ideas. Films may yield other types of projects that can be incorporated into the classroom setting. Casanave and Freedman (1995) assigned a film presentation project for their intermediate English students in which films were viewed holistically and critically. The implementation of PowerPoint and DVDs in student film presentations represents another collaborative group work that encourages computer applications (King, 2002).

Thus, "making the most of movies" has been adopted as a motto for teachers who defend the merits of films as a powerful tool for language acquisition. In other words, teachers need to make the most of learning opportunities by means of films to justify the use of films in the classroom. To start with, they may ask themselves several questions: What are the pedagogical reasons for using a particular film sequence (Stempleski, 2000:10)? What type of approach in dealing with movies should be taken, viewing a movie in its entirety or in segments? Will non-captioned or captioned films be more appropriate for a particular class? What are the film selection criteria? And finally, what kind of activities will integrate the four skills into the course, elicit student involvement and avoid passive viewing?

Short Sequence Approach

While presenting films, some structurally-driven approaches have been widely adapted by classroom teachers: a sequential approach of teaching scene-by-scene or one segment at a time; a single-scene approach in which only one scene or segment from the entire film is utilized; a selective approach featuring only a few scenes from different parts of the film; a whole film approach that shows the film in its entirety in a single viewing. When selecting approaches, they all are feasible depending on the teaching objectives and target groups.

Many advocates of short sequences suggest that two-hour feature film has the problem of overload and length for less advanced learners, so

the teacher needs to provide bite-sized chunks for them to digest. Essentially, the teacher has to decide which function each sequence is to perform (Stempleski, 2000:10). Is this sequence used to generate a theme-based discussion, to practice listening strategies, to illustrate a grammar or pronunciation point, or to present cultural background? What activities will benefit them the most?

For mature and advanced learners, films should be chosen not simply for their entertainment value; they should be timely and deliver a clear message to enhance classroom discussion. Short sequence approach can be used for theme-based discussion, dealing with thought-provoking films in different fields such as medicine, education, science, history, marriage and justice (See suggested films in Appendix A). The teacher can first engage in a general conversation concerning any of the themes that the film will be exploring. Later on, the teacher moves on to focus on more specific issues concerning the topic of the film, illustrated by selected key scenes to instigate stimulating discussion.

A theme-based discussion allows students to explore relevant issues raised from a variety of perspectives, develop critical thinking skills, elicit responses, converse freely on all aspects of the film they watch and release them from inhibiting grammatical rule-binding and detailed-oriented learning habits. Usually these theme-based films are inappropriate for complete viewing due to length and overall language difficulty. When showing the film, the teacher may just select clips on DVD, follow the main plot line and ignore all the subplots within an hour.

Whole Film Approach

The whole film approach is an approach with which a feature film is shown in its entirety and studied as a whole. It usually takes one or two hours rather than the typical video-teaching techniques such as sound off/vision on, sound on/vision off, pause/freeze-frame control, jumbling sequence and split viewing, among others (Stempleski, 1990). This approach avoids the hassle of repeatedly turning on and off a movie video, rewinding it, replaying it and analyzing it in piecemeal fashion. Shea (1995) argues persuasively that using movies in their entirety is a theoretically and empirically sound way of teaching English. "If I cut up the movie in five minute segments, focusing on the linguistic structure and the form of the language, the students might never have recognized the emotional force and narrative dynamic of the video as a story about

important things in the human experience, aesthetic and ethical things like dreams, imagination, and commitment; things that drive language and ultimately stimulate students to learn it in the first place". A short-segment approach may be useful with most types of videos, e.g., TV commercials, or news to supplement content materials. However, "if communication is to be emphasized, the complete communicative process of a movie is in order as the vehicle for study. Obsessive word-by word study approaches can be avoided by training students to develop gist understanding via key conversations and lines of dialogue and thus producing many extra opportunities for language development in every possible skill direction" (Wood, 1995). Using a comprehensive approach would be less time-consuming and more logical, coherent, and motivating for students (Chung, 1995).

Showing complete film enhances student motivation to such an extent that students are visibly impressed with how much English they can figure out. Their confidence soars when they realize that understanding a movie is not as difficult as they had originally imagined.

In addition, the limited amount of listening input has been a disadvantage for EFL learners to learn realistic and current usage of English. Fragment audio recordings accompanying with textbooks designed for EFL learners hardly prepare learners for full-length listening in advanced studies. In addition, "the language in the majority of current popular EFL authentic materials... usually contains roughly 20% culture-specific expressions or concepts and can hence serve as smooth foray into the real English-speaking world" (Hwang, 2000). Whole film approach with abundant exposure to authentic listening not only facilitates learners' listening strategy training, but also achieves awareness of pragmatics which as an essential component of communicative competence.

Selection Criteria

The merits of uninterrupted film viewing are numerous as long as teachers follow accepted standards of choosing films: choosing the right film for a particular level of students. Thus, finding an appropriate feature film is one of the most useful things that a teacher can do. Arcario (1992) suggests that comprehensibility is a major criterion in selecting a video language-learning purposes. It is important to choose scenes that balance dialog with a high degree of visual support, appropriate speech delivery, clear picture and sound, and standard

accent. Sometimes the storyline might be appealing to students, but the enunciation, speed and accent make it very difficult to understand. Using the wrong film in the wrong way can lead to utter frustration. Student may end up confused, depressed and convinced they will never understand "real" English (Doye, 1998). Viewing films could easily turn into a frustrating experience for learners who might give up this stimulating tool for English learning.

The appropriateness of content and the comfort level of students need to be taken into account in the selection process. Films with explicit sex, gratuitous violence and excessive profanity should probably be ruled out. However, films with minor scenes of sex, violence and profanity should be skipped and fast forwarded past whatever may be deemed offensive.

As far as student motivation and interest are concerned, entertaining films are sometimes enjoyable and relevant to learners' appreciation of popular culture. Dramatic tension and good acting surely will make students forget about language and focus more closely on the plot. Recently released films are more appealing to students than classic ones (preferably within the last fifteen years and with a notable box office success), even though old films are by and large inoffensive.

Choosing films that are age- and culture-appropriate and suitable for both genders is also important. Romances, romantic comedies, and less-violent action movies with relatively simple plots and subplots are also good choices for college students.

The length of viewing time in the whole-film approach is quite different from existing language-based video-teaching approaches. For more proficient students, it is better to show a two-hour movie in two class periods. It serves as good intensive listening training. When students are attracted and deeply absorbed by the story, they do appreciate the continuity their teacher allows. For low-level learners, usually one class period is recommended since the problem of overload and intensive concentration is required while watching a movie.

DVD Films

DVD has replaced video as the medium of the new millennium after it hit the market four years ago. DVD is vastly superior to videotape because its durability, compactness, audio-visual quality, availability

and other interactive features. In educational settings, many classrooms and language labs have been upgraded from VHS to this most popular movie medium. Language teachers should prepare for the coming of DVD and consider the benefits of incorporating DVD into language classrooms (Chun, 1996).

A. Captioned Films DVD greatly aids classroom teachers who plan and carry out movie-based lessons for instruction. There are a variety of special features offered on DVD films make the use of films in the classroom so conveniently, including behind the scenes commentary, 8 language choice, and deleted scenes at the end of each film. One of the most beneficial parts of all is scene access, so you may access the specific scenes by pressing the menu key on the DVD remote control and press the menu key again to return to the movie. There is no rewinding or fast forwarding.

Another added feature is the closed captions, without the aid of a caption decoder. Teachers are sometimes fraught with uncertainty if they should show a film with or without captions. Which way will benefit their students most? The answer is that each one serves different purposes depending on the teaching objectives.

As this interest in captioned materials is relatively increasing, research in the field indicates that captioned movies are more effective than non-captioned videos in terms of improving overall listening comprehension and helping EFL students' comprehension ability (Kikuchi, 1997). From my experience and observation, the value and benefits of using captioned films for language learners can be summarized as follows:

- . motivate students to learn English, especially to listen to the dialogs in movies
- . bridge the gap between reading skills and listening skills
- . reinforce students' understanding of English context-bound expressions
- . follow a plot easily
- . learn new vocabulary and idioms
- . develop students' concentration in following lines
- . learn how to pronounce certain words
- . develop word recognition
- . process a text rapidly and improve rapid reading

- enable students to keep up with the captions that accompany the spoken dialogs
- comprehend jokes and have a few hearty laughs
- learn different strategies and styles for processing information easily get a clear image of related dynamic verbs and sound effects words in brackets appear on the screen, synchronized with corresponding actions and sounds such as slam the door and giggle.

The problem with using English-captioned film videos is primarily that students focus on reading captions and rarely listen to dialogs. The assignment becomes reading skills development rather than listening comprehension training. Since they read word by word on the screen, they no doubt understand better what the characters say. It may also help learner practice pronunciation by repeating after the characters. Meanwhile, by doing so, it sacrifices listening strategy training such as guessing and inferring meanings from visual clues. Furthermore, reading subtitles is a habit that is hard to break once form it. It serves as a crutch that provides security and without which the habituated student becomes afraid to take a step on his own. Learning to view non-captioned films is a big step that they have to take sooner or later if they are ever to experience a breakthrough in English learning.

B. Non-captioned Films EFL learners, who are eager to comprehend spoken materials intended for native speakers of English, but, at the same time, have misgivings their own proficiency levels, experience mixed feelings about non-captioned films. They are worried that they might end up becoming confused and frustrated when fast-paced dialogues in English-only films whiz by them. Several apparent difficulties of watching non-captioned films arise mainly from language difficulty: the rapid pace of speech; unclear speech and accents; technical or specialized terminology; overload of archaic slang and idioms; unfamiliarity of cultural background/ knowledge; culturally specific humor, etc. Exposing learners to authentic materials, however, is a necessary stage in the learning process to help them master listening strategies.

Some compelling reasons for using non-captioned movies for listening comprehension and fluency practice should not be ignored:

- . help students develop a high tolerance for ambiguities.
- . enhance students' listening strategies such as guessing meaning from context and inferring strategies by visual clues, facial expressions, voice, and sound track
- . promote active viewing and listening for key words and main ideas
- . motivate students to make use of authentic English material on their own
- . provide students with the opportunity to experience a great sense of accomplishment and self-assurance.

Conclusion

DVD feature films provide enjoyable language learning opportunities for students if the teacher chooses appropriate length films, either complete one or segments, which are purposeful and tailored to students' learning needs and proficiency level. Both captioned and non-captioned films benefit students in various ways. A teacher might work at cross-purposes, and aim overtly at different aspects of language, by using both types of movies alternatively. English-captioned films are a rich source of instructional materials that provide examples and content in oral communication. Non-captioned English films are challenging and can be exploited for listening comprehension practice, even if the comprehension is limited to advanced students.

An instructor's initial attempts to implement the teaching of DVD films in the classroom may be overwhelming. However, with each successive attempt, by using modified guidelines and increasing teaching experience, teaching DVD feature films turns into a rewarding experience for both teachers and students whose enthusiasm become evident. When students are provided with well-structured tasks and activities designed to promote active viewing and stimulate involvement for making the most of learning opportunities of movies, there is no doubt that feature films are the most stimulating and enjoyable learning materials for the E-generation.

Notes on Fair Use

Fair use rules for videotapes/DVDs: Each country has its own video copyright laws and adopts the provisions of international treaties as it sees fit. In US, section 110 (1) of the Copyright Act of 1976 specifies that the following is permitted: Performance or display of a work by

instructors or pupils in the course of face-to-face teaching activities of a nonprofit educational institution, in a classroom or similar place devoted to instruction (Simons, 1995). The work shown must be a legitimate (not illegally reproduced) copy with the copyright notice included. In some countries, only the film that has received a site license which allows the film video to be shown to students for no additional charge. You need to purchase films for public viewing from distributors who charge about \$US100 per film.

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