

THE EFFECTIVE USE OF MOTION PICTURES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The use of films and motion pictures in the ESL classroom is becoming an accepted practice at many universities in China. This paper explores the various approaches to the effective use of motion pictures in the ESL classroom. The different types of tasks and academic exercises associated with the approaches are discussed.

Keywords: Class Exercises, ESL Audio-Visual Tools, Films, Motion Pictures, Visual Aids

INTRODUCTION:

Visual aids are a great enhancement for teaching an ESL class in China. An even better resource is a motion picture or video clip. The combination of both image and sound significantly aids in the achievement of the pedagogical goals of reading, writing, listening and speaking English. Academics debate whether showing either a short sequence or an entire film can replace the published text in the ESL classroom. However, based on the feedback of about 300 students enrolled in a Western culture course at a university in China's Henan province, it does significantly add to the learning experience. Conversely, no textbook is comprehensive, allowing the need for a good teaching aid such as a motion picture (Li, 2009). Finally, the presence of film and video changes the learning atmosphere of the class, as ESL students are hearing authentic English in real life scenes and natural settings.

APPROACHES:

SHORT SEQUENCES VS. WHOLE FILM:

Do we let them eat cake? If so, the entire cake or just a piece? Some academics favor the *short sequence* methodology as it tends to enhance the theme-based classroom discussion, especially for topics such as medicine, education, science, technology, business, history, marriage and the legal system (King, 2002). Also, there are facilitators that favor the *whole film* approach as motion pictures can function as the core content and become an integral part of the curriculum (Sommer, 2001). As lesson time in many ESL classrooms is often limited, the short sequence approach has been favored by many teachers who choose to use films in class.

The *short sequence* approach includes a single-scene approach in which only one segment from a film is played, or a selective approach featuring a few scenes from different parts of a film. This approach can better engage students as the play time is short and the focus relatively clearer. The short sequence approach is usually used to introduce a topic, or as a pre-reading or writing task to help students brainstorm ideas. Short film segments can also be used to focus on the linguistic structure and the form of the language. Shorter viewing time is also more favorable to beginners or younger learners who might find prolonged viewing too challenging linguistically (Yu, 2009).

With the *whole film* approach, ESL teachers are faced with a few issues. Most university level classes are two hour classes divided into two fifty minutes segments. While the need to start, stop and explain the film is not necessary, the students miss out on the critical background information needed to understand the context of the story. Moreover, this makes it difficult to complete and before, during and after exercises. However, some academics feel that the benefits of screening an uninterrupted film are numerous, if the film is suitable for that level of students. The film's dialogue must be both clear and comprehensible.

CAPTIONS VS. NO CAPTIONS:

To caption or not to caption? That is the question. Some academics feel that captions or subtitles in the ESL student's original language are better than showing a motion picture without captions (King, 2002; Kikuchi, 1997). In terms of listening and the overall ESL comprehension, captioned videos are more effective for the following reasons:

1. Students are more motivated to learn the English dialogue
2. The gap between reading and listening skills is bridged.
3. Students can follow a plot more easily.
4. Pronunciation of words is learned.
5. Word recognition is enhanced.
6. Idioms become better understood.
7. Reading and processing skills are improved. (King, 2002)

Non-captioned films have their benefits in the ESL classroom. One major benefit is that it increases the ESL student's concentration on key words and dialogue. Students learn to focus on visual clues such as facial expressions as well as intonation and accents. Students who learn English from non-captioned motion pictures experience a feeling of accomplishment as they are learning native English in a natural setting.

DRAMA VS DOCUMENTARY:

Dramatic feature films can be used as secondary sources for genres such as novels and short stories. As a complement to a classic work of English literature, the film adaptation can be quite useful, especially if students are having a difficult time and are resorting to translators to help them understand the story better. Rather than

substituting the film for the entire novel, it is best to have the students read as much of the book as possible and then have them view select scenes from the film. The purpose of showing scenes from the film is to reiterate the story and broaden the students' knowledge of the written text (Sherman, 2003). Before screening the film to your students, it is important to view select scenes from the film and make sure they accurately correspond with the written text. Many films are heavily edited, often eliminating characters and locales, as directors and producers often use cinematic license for their needs.

Documentary can be quite useful in alternative ESL environments, such as a business or history class. Non-fiction films such as *The Corporation* (2003) and *Enron: the Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005) can enhance a textbook chapter on corporate social responsibility just as Ken Burns's *The Civil War* (1990) can bring the experience of 19th century combat into a history classroom.

TYPES OF TASKS:

1. Pre-viewing task – The pre-viewing time gives the ESL instructor an opportunity to provide some background information on the film (director, producer, actors, year of production, music, writer, etc.) or discuss the background and setting of a scene (characters, plot, themes), depending on the approach used in class. The time can be used to pose questions about the story that can be answered after the viewing of the film.

2. While-viewing task - While-viewing tasks provide an opportunity to deepen the understanding of a film and conduct a comprehension check. One idea is for the teacher to play a scene with the sound off and the English subtitles on (subtitles can be in the students' first language if the level demands). The teacher then replays the scene with both the subtitles and sound, and replays it a third time with the sound alone and no subtitles. This technique is suitable for dramatic scenes, or when dialect or slang is spoken, because it facilitates understanding and makes students feel more confident (Roell, 2010).

3. Post-viewing task - Post-viewing activities allow students to check their comprehension and use the new language they have learned (Roell, 2010). In the activity called "Fly on the Wall," students reconstruct a movie scene from memory, as if they are unseen witnesses. After writing down their accounts, they view the scene again to check their recall and have the opportunity to amend their rendition (Sherman 2003). To strengthen their descriptive abilities, students can analyze characters in a film and write descriptive portraits of the characters' appearance, education, profession, relationships, likes and dislikes, and other qualities.

TYPES OF EXERCISES:

WRITTEN:

Vocabulary exercises are quite popular in written ESL activities involving motion pictures. One method is to provide a handout for each student with a list of quotations from a scene or segment of a motion picture and an answer sheet (Kusumarasdyati, 2004). Another exercise is to pose a question based on dialogue from a motion picture, e.g. the scene in *The Graduate* (1967) where Mr. McGuire tells Benjamin "just one word – plastics." You could ask students to interpret that in a five minute writing exercise.

WRITTEN AND ORAL:

Students view a scene from a film with the sound turned off. They then predict the content of the scene, write their own script and perform it in front of the class. After the performances students watch the scene with the sound on and decide which group was the funniest or the nearest to the original (Kusumarasdyati, 2004).

CONCLUSION:

Students often show a great amount of interest when watching English language films. The teacher's task is to harness this enthusiasm in a way that develops a positive effect on language learning. (Li, 2009) The key to the effective use of motion pictures in the EFL classroom lies in the creative presentation of films and in the construction of challenging, yet achievable, learning tasks that are enjoyed by ESL students. Teachers and facilitators should foster and develop motivation by providing clear goals and achievable tasks using motion pictures which might otherwise be beyond the linguistic capacity of the students.

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