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## **Abstract**

For many years visual aids such as videos, films and specially produced language learning programs have been part of the language learning landscape. More recently, formats such as DVD and DivX have greatly enhanced the value of movies as a language learning tool. However, when movies are used in teaching, do we know what we are doing? Do entertainment movies have a place in the curriculum, or should they merely be viewed as an optional extra?

This article will look at the contemporary movie formats, what pedagogical relevance they have in language learning and suggest ways of assessing their usefulness. Additionally, it will discuss the ways in which entertainment movies are currently used in an English preparatory program. Specific examples will be discussed with regard to the use of subtitles, pre-viewing, while-viewing and post-viewing tasks.

## **1. The Past**

Firstly, we'll take a brief look at the history of the moving picture in the English Language classroom.

## **1.1 'Made for Teaching' Videos**

Commercially available videos, explicitly designed for learning English initially promised to reinvigorate the language learning experience. As King (2002) notes:

*'Video is a much more dynamic medium than a static text or a sound-only recording.'*

So, we can see that learning English through movies represents a novel approach for some students, whose preconceived notion of learning English is based on their past learning experiences. For many students, learning experiences are primarily coursebook-oriented and test-driven, with a focus on form rather than meaning, and accuracy rather than communication. Such standard teaching materials can lack a realistic, meaningful context. Indeed, as Stempleski (2000) notes, there are numerous benefits to using educational videos:

*'They are likely to already have been evaluated for language, content, and length, and many instructional videos are packaged as multimedia resources that include student workbooks, teacher guides, video transcripts, and audiotapes.'*

In short, videos presented a refreshing change whilst adhering to the needs of a pedagogically sound environment. However, this novelty factor could not sustain interest for long.

## **1.2 What was the student response?**

There were a number of factors which meant that ELT videos were not particularly durable. As King suggests:

*'Within a relatively short time span, student interest in video as a teaching mode waned. Watching the same few video actors and actresses appear in episode after episode became a dull and uninspiring routine for most learners.'*

Mejia (2003) highlights another important factor, i.e. that such videos were clearly not 'real life', rather they were obviously contrived for the purpose of teaching particular language:

*'A drawback to this type of material is that because it is scripted and professionally prepared, it often does not use authentic language.'*

The problems often noted with regard to course books, that the material exists just to teach 'language point X', transferred quickly to such educational videos. This leads us to consider what alternatives were available to these specially prepared products.

## **1.3 Alternatives**

The obvious alternative to using purpose-made, professionally-prepared materials was to use something 'authentic'. Authentic materials on modern formats, such as DVD and DivX, contain a great many useful features, and these will be discussed in section 3.1 of this paper. Authentic materials in the past, while presenting real spoken English, did not

offer such benefits as sub-titles. Yoder (1988) explains a method she used to overcome this problem:

- Hand written sub-titles on paper.
- Sub-titles photocopied on to an OHT.
- OHP set up next to video.
- Hand-written sub-titles shown on wall next to TV as lines are spoken.

Yoder comments that this 'worked equally with a television program or film... the titles were clear and easy to read.' While this may indeed have had sound pedagogical value, it is doubtful if the huge amount of time and effort could have been justified. While this is just one example of the problems inherent in the use of authentic materials in the past, pedagogical advantages to using authentic materials were still evident. Issues relating to this relevance will now be discussed.

## **2. Pedagogical Relevance**

### **2.1 What skills can be learned?**

Yoder's example, though exhaustively time consuming, hints at one of the main advantages of using authentic material, i.e. combining auditory and visual input. Burt (1999) offers several other reasons for using video in adult classrooms:

'Video combines visual and audio stimuli, is accessible to those who have not yet learned to read and write well, and provides context for learning... for English language learners... Video can be controlled (stopped, paused, repeated), and it can be presented to a group of students, to individuals, or for self study. It allows learners to see facial expressions and body language at the same time as they hear the stress, intonation, and rhythm of the language.'

As we can see, there are numerous pedagogical reasons for using films in language teaching. Furthermore, the availability of sub-titles on modern formats, such as DVD and DivX offer myriad possibilities for language learning (adapted from King (2002)) :

- Motivation for students to learn English, especially to listen to the dialogs in movies.
- Bridging the gap between reading skills and listening skills.
- Reinforcement of 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.
- Processing a text rapidly and improve rapid reading.
- Learn different strategies and styles for processing information

### **2.2 Insights into Culture and Appropriacy**

Learners can increase their cultural competence with regard to the language. As Peterson & Coltrane (2003) note:

*'Using authentic sources from the native speech community helps to engage students in authentic cultural experiences... Teachers can adapt their use of authentic materials to suit the age and language proficiency level of the students. For example, even beginning language students can watch and listen to video clips taken from a television show in the target language and focus on such cultural conventions as greetings.'*

Kortner (1999) reiterates this by suggesting that film communication offers a link between classrooms and society.

### **2.3 Authenticity - How can we assess a film's relevance?**

So, what issues do we need to consider when choosing an authentic film for language learning purposes? Having conducted a formal study regarding this question, Canning-Wilson (2000) suggests that the length of dialogues, in direct relation to the amount of on-screen action, will affect the ability of the students to derive meaning from what they watch:

*'Scenes where utterances were backed up by an action and/or body language and that were relatively shorter, were considered easier to understand by students. Less lively scenes, which involved relatively long stretches of conversation, were labeled as more difficult.'*

Canning-Wilson also states that students like using films in language learning, and that generally students prefer action/entertainment films. This should obviously influence the type of film chosen, i.e. films high on artistic merit may not be as useful as those from the 'fast paced, shoot-em-up' action genre. This issue will be raised again in section 4, when we discuss our approach to using films.

King reaffirms the importance of comprehensibility, suggesting that films that need to contain a lot of action:

*'It is important to choose (films) that balance dialogue with a high degree of visual support.'*

The appropriateness of content and the comfort level of students also need to be taken into account in the selection process. For example, films with explicit sex, gratuitous violence and excessive profanity should probably not be used. Furthermore, a certain level of language competence is necessary. This is an issue that will be discussed in further detail in sections 4 and 5.

## **3. The Benefits of Modern Formats**

### **3.1 DVD and DivX**

DVD has undoubtedly replaced VHS video as the medium of the modern era. DVD is vastly superior to videotape because its durability, compactness, audio-visual quality, availability and other interactive features. Furthermore, Chun (1996) notes that in educational settings, many classrooms and CALL Centres have been upgraded from VHS to DVD. DivX is a similar format to DVD, and holds many of the same advantages.

King (2002) notes that one of the most beneficial features of DVDs is scene access, i.e. specific scenes can be accessed without having to watch the whole film. There is no rewinding or fast forwarding. Another distinct advantage of these formats is the availability of sub-titles. If we think back to the example of Yoder in section 1.3, we suggested that there is some pedagogical value in showing sub-titles to accompany the spoken dialogue. Kikuchi (1997) suggests that captioned movies are more effective than non-captioned videos in terms of improving overall listening comprehension and helping EFL students' comprehension ability.

### **3.2 The Internet**

The internet contains a wealth of information and resources that can aid in the use of movies in language learning. Many examples of the websites that we often use are listed in the appendix at the end of this paper. Some of the things that we use the internet for are:

- Pre-viewing materials - movie trailers.
- Background information - facts related to the plot and the stars of a film.
- Webquests - assigning task to learners which require research on the net.
- Movie Scripts - learners can find entire scripts for such activities as role-plays.
- Sub-titles - sub-titles for all movies are available on the internet, by using the DivX format, viewers can see sub-titles in different fonts, colours, etc.

These things will be discussed in more detail in section 4 of this paper, when we discuss how we can use films in a preparatory school program.

### **4. What can we Do?**

Firstly, we should describe the context in which films can be used in a university preparatory program.

#### **Pre-viewing activities**

- Focus questions and a Q&A session: The purpose of these activities is to get the learners thinking about the genre of film, the kind of vocabulary they associate with this genre, and the kind of action they will expect to take place.
- Trailers: These aim to activate learner schemata in a way that we would if we were preparing learners to do a reading or listening activity in class. They give learners an entry point into the movie, provide contextual clues as to the content, and provide motivation to watch.
- Power Point summaries: These build on what is achieved by watching the trailer, i.e. they can introduce the main characters and provide a brief synopsis of the plot.

#### **While-viewing**

- Reading / Listening questions: A set of questions prepared by the teacher help us check listening and reading comprehension of learners while watching the film and reading the subtitles.

- **Manipulated sub-titles:** Some of the scripts are deliberately changed and learners are asked to find the mistakes and correct them. We can also omit some words, phrases or sentences and ask learners to complete the blanks.

### **Post-viewing**

- **Role-play:** Scripts of different scenes are given to different groups of learners and guided to act out the scenes.
- **Discussions:** Some questions are prepared asking learners to reflect on certain aspects of the film. For example 'Would you have behaved in a similar way to character X in this situation?', or 'Were you satisfied with the end of the film? If not, how would you change the ending?'
- **Movie reviews:** As an extension activity, learners can write a film review. This can be a very fulfilling activity, as there are ample opportunities for learners to have their writing published on the internet. [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) is a popular site for this, and one we've used with our learners.

## **5. The Curriculum - To DVD or not to DVD?**

By way of conclusion, we will comment on the role of films in the modern language curriculum. While there are many noted pedagogical advantages to the use of films, there are also several considerations as to why they should not be included in a curriculum.

Firstly, as Canning-Wilson notes, there is little evidence as to the long-term benefits of film use as a language learning tool:

'It can be argued that video instruction should be discouraged because there is scant empirical proof to verify comprehension. For example, how can long-run effects of video be measured and how much exposure to video would make a significant difference in the language learning process?'

So, how can we prove that watching movies aids the language learning process? After all, King further suggests that time, feasibility and the perceptions of teachers are important considerations when thinking about using films:

'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.'

Having worked in intensive preparatory school programs for numerous years, we can recognise some truth in this statement; some teachers don't view films as valuable tools. This obviously relates to the issue mentioned in section 1.1, exemplified by learners' initial jubilation at getting to watch a film. Watching movies is something that learners do in their freetime, when they are not studying. However, this in itself shows the value of movies; going to the cinema/watching movies on TV are things that learners actually do.

A dichotomy therefore arises; watching movies is an activity that learners regularly engage in, yet incorporating movies into a curriculum may meet with resistance from teachers already overloaded with material. Furthermore, showing a small segment of a film will create the 'just for the language classroom' phenomenon noted in section 1.1. It will also destroy the meaning of the film. If the film is seen as a communicative vehicle, from which the learner is to derive meaning, then surely watching a film in its entirety is necessary. Nevertheless, doing so would be to risk sensory overload. So, we can see that the main issues when deciding whether to DVD or not DVD are related to time, finding appropriate films in terms of content and comprehensibility, and whether showing a segment or the whole film is most beneficial. Consequently, we have tried to eliminate all of these potential constraints by making movies available as extracurricular activities rather than as a set part of the curriculum.

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## Some Useful Resources for Teaching with Movies

Below we have listed some of the websites where you can find materials or information relating to movies.

- The Internet Movie Database - <http://www.imdb.com/> This is the ultimate database for movie lovers. Get plot summaries, reviews, quotes, and much much more for over 150,000 movies.
- The Greatest Films - <http://www.filmsite.org/> An award-winning, unique resource for classic film buffs and all who are interested in films - since mid-1996, with interpretive and descriptive, detailed synopses, review commentary, an unparalleled wealth of film reference material, and historical background for hundreds of classic English-language films in the last century.
- Drew's Script-o-Rama - <http://www.script-o-rama.com/> Whole movie scripts can be downloaded. Many films are available.
- ESL Notes - <http://www.eslnotes.com/> This site provides exhaustive materials: Each individual movie guide is a detailed synopsis of a popular movie that consists of the following: a summary of the plot, a list of the major characters, an extensive glossary of vocabulary and various cultural references that even advanced ESL learners would often not understand and questions for ESL class discussion.
- Jurassic Punk - <http://www.jurassicpunk.com> This site offers lots of information about films, and a large number of high quality cinema movie trailers can be downloaded.
- ESL Partyland: Teaching with Film and Video - <http://www.eslpartyland.com/teachers/nov/film.htm> Featuring both general teaching resources as well as fully-developed lessons on various films and videos.
- Onestop English Magazine: Teaching English Using Video - <http://www.onestopenglish.com/News/Magazine/Archive/video.htm> Some practical ideas for incorporating films into the classroom.
- Simplyscripts - <http://www.sipmplyscripts.com> This site offers scripts of movies and a lot of information about them.