

## Video Movies in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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### Abstract

This present examines the combination of the most motivating audio-visual resource, the movie, and one of the most effective language-teaching methodologies, the communicative approach, starting with a detailed rationale for the use of movies in TEFL in Section Two. Attention is paid to the effect which the irrepressible interest films can generate with teachers and students. Section Three continues with a discussion of whether video movies can be considered as an aspect of literature or whether their essential nature is something quite different, and of exactly what elements of their language and content are the most appropriate for teaching English with. The paper concludes with Section Four, an overview of some of the main principles of "film communication" (the term coined by this current author to describe the communicative use of video movies in TEFL) such as: continuity of learning environment, target language, cultural transparency, enjoyment of understanding, target-mode balance, a whole-movie approach.

### Introduction

The last quarter of the twentieth century represents something of a watershed in the development of technology in teaching English as a foreign language, and nowhere more so than in the area of feature film. Comprehensive studies of audio-visual technology in language teaching at the beginning of this period (such as El-Araby, 1974) barely mention video, and can give no indication of the dramatic spread in the use of film, which they only take to mean programs made specifically for language learning, such as the vintage *Walter & Connie* Reporting BBC series. Now into the 1990s, no study of language teaching can avoid mentioning video's potential, whether it be in terms of video observation as a valid learning process (Brumfit, 1991), its effectiveness as a means of language input (Bolitho, 1990), or its cultural depth (Wringe, 1989). At the same time, the number of studies treating video in

EFL exclusively is already too large for almost any bibliography to include them all.

### Why Video Movies?

The fact that movies are used in TEFL is not enough justification alone for such use. Most studies on video include film rationales. Interested readers can compare the reasons that already abound via Allen (1986), Lonergan (1984) and so on, such as how film's air of reality stimulates real-world language demands. To focus such reasoning on the use of video movies in particular, several basic but important factors should be included at this point. Firstly, it is necessary to establish what the basic language-learning features of video are, as they indicate the medium's suitability for use in TEFL. These features include: memorability, control, motivation, communication, and compassion.

Teaching languages "head-on" as it were (e.g., explaining grammar, having students translate into their own language or learn vocabulary by heart) appears less effective than content-based language teaching in TEFL in terms of such vital factors as memorability and schema development. By extension, video with interesting content and meaningful context is also likely to be both memorable and capable of developing students' language skills because of the valid and vivid actuation of language situations it can command. Unlike real-life language situations, which are uncontrollable and unrepeatable, videos can of course be replayed a limitless number of times--by the teacher in imaginative activity design, and by the student working independently at an individualized pace. A video can also be reversed, fastforwarded or paused, making it possible to study paralinguistic features, which comprise over half of any face-to-face communication act, and may be impossible to isolate meaningfully in any other form.

Good video can engage the imagination and interest of its viewers, who tend to react positively, staying alert and attentive throughout because they are eager to learn what happens next. As Kirk (1992) finds, second only to native-speaking language teachers themselves, for example, movies have been found to be a prime motivational force in studying English. Because video can embody a comparatively natural, living context for the language it contains, a communication act can be easier to grasp and thus understand in all its aspects. It is likely, therefore, to be easier to learn language from. A student can simultaneously visualize what he or she is hearing (Stempleski in Wood, 1990). Video, plus the right kinds of support material, activate the passive knowledge of language learners in particular, and assist with language assimilation and transfer, both in terms of that language presented as well as that which is implicitly suggested.

The most intangible but arguably most vital element of a language stimulus is the ability to affect its user. This is not to say that video possesses such a quality automatically, but that careful selection (plus adequate support-material development) can create the possibility both for students to learn the language and to be inspired at the same time. Ideally, the inspiration that video can generate tends to promote not only language learning,

but acquisition of insights previously unfelt and not understood.

The concept of the video medium as text is already established. From 1990, for example, U.S.A. state education boards like Texas officially adopted video in place of traditional text-based curricula. Of course, this is not to say that the conventional written text is finished, or that other kinds of text are impossible, but in an age of visual technology, an age where media are the message, language teachers planning curricula need at least to acknowledge that video can help them focus student attention more powerfully than other texts. They stand to gain as much as anyone from the employment of video.

What else can video do to help with the employment of teaching English as a foreign language, in particular? In the context of Japan, for example, this question was answered by the largest EFL Video Special Interest Group thus:

Video has vast potential for enriching language study and making it more enjoyable and effective. Researching how best to choose from and use the mountain of available material is (the) primary goal. Video offers both a multilingual and a multicultural oasis, in what is essentially an otherwise monolingual and monocultural society. Its methodology extends across all disciplines involving areas of instruction, teacher training and research.

(Wood, 1992)

The kinds of general problem confronting the EFL teacher in particular can be helped by video when there is limited contact with those whose first language is English. Even in EFL situations, however, where such contacts may be much easier to come by, video's controllability and motivational strength are also likely to be of much benefit. Of course, movies cannot solve every problem alone, but they can play a big part in effective language acquisition for both EFL and ESL students. The sense of achievement that students gain from understanding even a short scene in a movie is important, especially in those environments where the kind of English is used does not exist communicatively, and thus lacks spontaneity. A clear distinction can be felt between generations of learners who lacked ready exposure to such media as English movies, and more recent age groups that have much greater access to a wider range of films thanks to more choice and such innovations as cable and satellite television.

While video movies may be just fiction dressed in reality, and should therefore not be mistaken for life, they offer a linguistically valuable alternative to living in a full-time English environment. They make it easier to imagine the context of living English than printed text, pictures or audio tape alone, because of their dynamic potential fusion of three communication modes--the vocal, visual and verbal. They offer wide ranges of such features as: subject, language, communicative situation, imagination, and culture. More than other EFL texts, video movies both seek out the new with tireless persistence, but at the same time are capable of possessing a timeless value that rivals literature or any other art form. The maturing rewatchability as it were of the best films makes them a pleasure to study repeatedly and in ever greater depth.

The huge subject range that movies offer makes almost any selection of life or human imagination accessible. Notwithstanding feature film's ultimately fictive nature, however, in the context of the interest that they generate and the follow-up research on the themes that they raise, films can be part of the process of leading students to a discernment of cultural reality. Naturally, not every title is suitable for use in class. Even this situation can become a positive point in the language-learning situation, however, as productive discussion can arise from selection. Thus, for example, allowing students a degree of independent choice of movie title is important. At worst, those suggested that are not acceptable can still lead to better choices in the same genre. In some cases, a class suggestion may even turn the instructor's attention to material with excellent potential of which he or she was previously unaware.

Studies of the communicative language range of movies as opposed to video made specifically for students of EFL (Tatsuki, 1992) indicate that the spread of linguistic levels is much wider, covering beginner, intermediate and advanced, instead of merely the very beginner and the most advanced. Movies contain a broad spectrum of diction appropriate to almost any social situation. In terms of sound quality and acoustic range, too, video offers more than just audio, which must struggle to oversimplify sound effects in making them at all comprehensible. The visual reinforcement of film not only increases comprehensible language input, but the whole

realm of hearing, thus raising a viewer's sense of linguistic and paralinguistic authenticity. Especially in terms of the hidden language of video, this factor can be a great stimulus for language generation.

The range of language environment is also extended by the study of video movies, and not just physically in terms of location, which can reach the home and society in general in a number of ways, creating a social link with English speakers. Students who learn the necessary strategies to comprehend whole movies, or simply scenes to begin with, can apply them to their future viewing beyond the time limits of the school semester. Of course, the most diligent student, even after completing all of his or her courses, may make the effort to search out new printed EFL texts for self study, but the sheer availability of video movies, plus their greater attractiveness and appeal, seem likely to carry any interest in them created by their study in class further.

The cultural aspect of video movies presents nearly every convention imaginable. It displays countless examples of problematical behavior, conflicts and cruxes, private lifestyles and casual speech (Macdonald, 1990). Such authentic experiences on which students can draw are almost impossible to convey in class settings by other means. While this may be dismissed as mere vicarious pseudo-experience, in TEFL situations, where few other alternatives exist, video movies can be the next best thing to reality, and cheaper, more utilizable and more flexible than buying experience in the form of homestays or trips abroad. They can also lower the anxiety level of shier students.

### **Video Movies: Literature or Language?**

The links between literature and film are both long and getting stronger each year. In the 1930s and 1940s, it is estimated (Asheim, 1949) that 17% of films released by major studios each year were adaptations of novels. The figure was nearly double that in succeeding decades (Beja, 1976), and is certainly no less now. The Trend is not only a quantitatively significant one overall--in terms of the most successful and most critically acclaimed releases, the percentage based on books may be even higher. Naturally, such a long-standing relationship raises questions like: What exactly are movies? and, What responsibility, if any, do they have towards their sources?

According to one school of thought (Giddings, Selby, & Wensley, 1990), just as novels took over from drama (absorbing such qualities as character and dialogue), film initially took its shape from narrative prose, basing itself on stage drama. First called the Bioscope to reinforce its claim of imitating life, cinema sprang up on a wave of early technology and electricity. This school points out the primary weakness of movies in romanticizing appearance and language, as well as being over-specific in trying to pinpoint the appearance of a period too exactly, while novels that they based themselves on would be temporally far more fluid. The chronological imprecision of literary texts, they assert, defies the predominating here-and-now immediacy of films.

Giddings continues by comparing the stated aims of such well-known figures of cinema and literature as D.W. Griffith and Joseph Conrad, both of whom held that their principle aim was to make the spectator/reader see above all else. He refers to Sergei Eisenstein's belief that early film-makers actually got their ideas for such cinematic techniques as dissolves, superimposed shots, close-ups and so on from the novels of Charles Dickens. Giddings ascribes cinema's thirst for the novel as an attempt to acquire cultural respectability and redeem itself of vaudeville origins.

In terms of the specific problems involved in adapting a text into film, Giddings identifies such areas as: point of view, time, imagery, psychological realism, and so on. While the novel has several modes for exploiting point of view, a movie struggles with genuine first-person or multiple points of view. In the same way, he asserts that films also face a restricted sense of time--possessing just one, the present, as compared with the three tenses of novels. Imagery is an even greater struggle, as, depending on how strict a definition one employs, metaphor can only be verbal and thus uninterpretable visually. Giddings contends, however, that movies can achieve a form of metaphor through editing. He holds that while the camera can capture external truths, it cannot deal with those abstract concepts necessary to achieve the same sense of psychological realism possible with novels. Balancing out such apparently failed connections, Giddings quotes Stanley Kubrick's assertion that a film succeeds

not on the strength of a source, but on the ability to find its own style.

Taking over from where Giddings leaves off, Reynolds (1993) contends that the movie spectator only sees and hears what he or she is allowed to. He also points out that, while there is widespread tendency for teachers at all levels to integrate original text and adapted tape, it is questionable if a novel that takes more than a day to read can be fairly represented in a film that may last only two hours or less. Obviously, a lot of descriptive passages never appear. At the same time, he admits to the varying uses that a movie may put a book to, including that of inspirational starting point. As he warns, however, there are still those who only value a film's worth on its faithfulness to its source. Finally, Reynolds is also unable to approve of films that sacrifice the original issues to spectacle (which he indicates most do), and is adamant that imaginative literature's ultimate purpose is to be a forum for social and moral debate.

The overriding impression from such commentators is that specific rendition of books into films, with everything fleshed out into fixed physical and aural forms, reduces the ability to react imaginatively. The imagery and language of a book must be interpreted by a reader actively and individually, while the viewer of a movie is a passive recipient of a finished article. Other differences between novels and film include authorship, purpose and audience. While a novel is nearly always by a single writer, a movie requires a team of people to put together, all of whom may have a significant impact on the final product. An author only has an editor to contend with. A director has scriptwriters, musicians, lighting and camera crews, producers, and an entire cast. Mirroring this, just as reading is normally thought of as an individual act, cinema is a group activity. Also, readership may be confined to a narrow social stratum but movies on video and television can be watched by literally anyone.

Other commentators on film provide contrasting perspectives. Hollander (1991), for instance, challenges the stage and narrative orientation of cinema by pointing to the strong links with paintings. She holds that real cinematography shares with art an almost identical sense of psychological movement--surging in and out of frame as well as back and forth in time. After all, movies were originally

soundless, helping them achieve international visual communication, just as art had.

In sharp contrast to Giddings' ascription to Dickens, Hollander places the origins of movie dissolves, close-ups and so on directly in still pictures. While the sense of painting as a definitive model for cinema was originally stronger in European film than American counterparts (because of strong traditions that existed), it was in fact the French who first pointed out that popular films in the U.S.A. could be seriously considered as works of art. As Hollander astutely notes, American film noir is after all a French invention. It is also worth pointing out that, before novels were adapted, the custom to include illustrations on their pages was already firmly established, denying the purely verbal existence that some would assign to them.

The case for video as language text in TEFL has already been argued (Voller & Widdows, 1993). The use of literature in teaching English as a foreign language, specifically with video-movie adaptations in mind, has also become a trend (Bouman, 1991). To put the preceding views on the nature of film and its due relationship with literature into the TEFL context, some representative considerations of language-teaching practitioners need presenting. Bouman asserts that, while literature in written form is a latent creation only suitable for readers with sufficient linguistic and imaginative competence who can both "see" and interpret the descriptions and images, a filmed version of a novel can bridge the seeing gap for EFL students. It is specifically video's phasable viewing that adds the extra dimension of selective emphasis necessary to activate student viewers via imaginative language activities involving storyline, character, dramatic tension and so on.

A far more intensive approach to the use of literature and video movies in TEFL has been given by Ross (1991). His purpose was to examine film and literary technique, and he therefore examined not only a range of books and movies in detail, but also examples of short story and film clip by way of introduction. To ensure the maximum relevance to contemporary communication, only works from the mid-twentieth century on were used. Beginning with an examination of such literary features as imagery, sound and so on, their use in a number

of instances was examined. Next, film techniques (such as camera use, sound and editing) were considered in the light of different video scenes. Finally, three novels and their movie adaptations were studied and compared in detail. While students were initially anxious, the course reportedly succeeded because:

(i) the class could not rely on already existing critical studies to think for them as in many purely literary courses, and so became more used to thinking for themselves;

(ii) the process of acquiring language skills by studying specific content was found to be more effective than attempting (but often failing) to acquire them by studying language elements out of valid context and in isolation;

(iii) while one adaptation was too long, and another too faithful to its source, the film that achieved an original cinematographic translation of the novel on which it was based provided an excellent stimulus for active comparison;

(iv) the interest created both in the novel and the film gave those students who were either more literary oriented or more interested in cinema a powerful inspiration to pursue self-directed study after the course had finished in a choice of two directions; and,

(v) giving students the critical apparatus necessary to analyze what they read and viewed created the thought-provoked state of mind essential for them to use English meaningfully, ensuring greater linguistic development than otherwise.

While so many good films derive from literature, unless a director's stated aim is only to be faithful to his or her source, no ultimate responsibility to it can be expected, and certainly no more than the responsibility that any work of fiction owes to its own sources, either. Obviously, the influence of movies with literary links may be to weaken the reputation of a novel if the conversion has a negative effect on its audience, but cases where movies actually stimulate their viewing audience to seek out and read the works on which they were based (often when such books could never possibly hope for similar attention otherwise) abound. If a book is good enough to begin with, its true reputation and value can never be damaged by a film, in any case. Finally, the value of a good book or film must be independent of one other.

In the area of TEFL, the teacher does not have to be a film-studies expert to use movies successfully (Ricketts, 1991). If movies make up viewers' imaginations of physical details for them in contrast to the unfixity of prose descriptions, this is no particular drawback to the potential wealth of foreign-language-teaching opportunities that movies can still offer. Whether or not their specificity interferes with the prescribed process of literary appreciation, movies can and do help students to visualize not only physical appearance but also psychological states. Just as still pictures may be interpreted in various fashions (Hollander, 1991), so too may moving pictures speak to students in an infinite number of ways, which, if the instructor can tap into, will stimulate all the language production he or she could possibly wish to handle.

Just as there is both good and bad literature, not to mention good and bad painting, so there is good and bad cinema. The conversion process is not a one-to-one relationship. Good novels do not guarantee good films, and there are excellent films which either have no literary counterpart, or at least none really worth mentioning. Thus, while literature can certainly provide worthwhile content for the EFL teacher, it does not mean that movies have to compete with novels to earn enough dignity to qualify as study-worthy texts in their own right. A film has no binding obligation to tell the same story as the novel that may have prompted its creation. Movies are communicative entities in story form. We watch them as we read novels--ready to give their fictive element credence and suspend our disbelief, living them for their duration. In video form, we can turn the scenes back and forth like the pages of a book, and take the extra time necessary to appreciate the tripolar montage of sound, sight and syntax.

Video movies are neither simply language nor literature, but can contain elements of both. While purists may argue the case for verbal-only metaphors, as Martin asserts (1975), metaphor is only understandable by drawing upon experiences not derived from verbal data. The art of the director is to activate metaphors of sight and sound by materializing his or her most direct source, the shooting script (which is neither novel nor movie), into excellence, a rarity in any art form, but no less achievable in film.

### **Blackboard to Silverscreen: Film Communication Principles**

The existence of TEFL film communication has come about thanks to the power of feature film and the advent of video. The latter has brought not only the necessary control to one of the most movingly communicative media imaginable, but also the dramatic expansion of the movie-viewing environment--to homes, schools, libraries and so on. The spread of video films has been further stimulated by the internationalizing of movie companies and the subsequent rechanneling of their productions (along with a variety of related support materials) in response to the committed grassroots interest of English language teachers and their students alike, within the context of an enormous worldwide foreign and second language market.

While the principles of TEFL film communication will be self-evidently illustrated in this author's future study, presenting a quick-reference close-up of a representative sample of related guidelines at this juncture can help the reader identify such points more easily as they appear in time. While some of these goals are still relatively formative, the broad potential scope of their implementation is quite clear.

#### **(i) Communication-environment Continuity**

Film communication can offer many links between classrooms and society, such as engaging students in video-movie self study at home, encouraging their general interest in the world of film via news items, cinema visits and topics of conversation with people they meet. The wide range of subjects that movies treat can also prompt students to research for themselves areas of interest in which they have weak or little background knowledge, further generating communication possibilities with people of other nationalities--writing penpals, meeting travelers and so on. In this way, their interest will also extend through time, by picking up any interest in movies they may have had before starting such a course of study, as well as sustaining an active involvement in learning English through movies in later life.

#### **(ii) Comprehensive Target Language**

While the language in the video itself should not be allowed to dominate a class's study goals, it is still important, and all its most useful, transferable and potentially productive elements should be sought out and channeled into interesting meaningful and communicative

activities. It has been estimated that it can take as few as 600 different words to understand as much as 80% of almost any movie (Below, 1994). With the total number of different words in a movie ranging anywhere from 5,000 up to as many as 20,000, only around 10% of them or less appear therefore to be communicatively essential. Such a low figure suggests that there is a lot of scope left for activities that use other language, not necessary to the study of a movie as mere tapescript, but vital to all the different kinds of spin-off language activities that can be creatively generated by watching and reacting.

### (iii) Cultural Transparency

While no movie is likely to be totally free from some degree of cultural translucency, as it were, which viewers from other cultures may find interferes to some extent with their overall understanding of a particular film, those examples that are actually opaquely inward-looking, and thus lacking in sufficient relevance to anyone outside of a fixed cultural or sociological group, should be passed over in favor of films that achieve enough transparency to be beneficially assimilable by an international audience. The problem may lie not only in the film itself, but also in an instructor's treatment. If the teacher can find those points of connection most worthwhile to his or her particular students, the level of transparency does not have to be extremely high, while insensitive treatment of what may seem the most accessible movie for various national groups can doom any source to irrelevance.

### (iv) Curricular Integration

Video movies command too much attention to qualify as supplements to a curriculum, but they can still coexist and interweave with other concurrent pedagogical agendas. Their claim to authenticity should be respected by teachers and students, and at the same time, student discernment between the merely emotive and the genuinely valuable should be nurtured.

### (v) Enjoyment of Understanding to Deepen the Viewing Experience

Entertainment is not something to avoid, but the enjoyment that students derive from becoming able to understand something no matter how small (a word, a line, a feeling) from a film should be a high goal as it will lead to the deeper satisfaction of understanding a film better, even when students may already think they already know the movie in question well

enough. In order not to frustrate the normal sense of expectation that anyone, student or otherwise, will come to a film with, the instructor should clarify this aim from the outset, and assess as often as possible en route how in fact students feel they are or are not deriving pleasure from their attempts to learn both language and emotions that they may not have known before starting their course.

### (vi) Flexible Materials and Techniques Development

Because of the lack of consistent material development caused by such problems as copyright, there is a danger that those materials that do appear may be lopsidedly narrow in their presentation of technique choices. It is important to stress, therefore, as much flexibility of materials and techniques design. To this end, a good range of options needs to be given, so that most teachers coming to such resources will find something that can work for them under the particular conditions they find they have to teach. At the same time, especially for instructors who are busy or inexperienced in using video at all, detailed and coherent teaching suggestions and explanations are also needed.

### (vii) Interest-generating Personalization

As important as any other principle of film communication instruction is the need to help students make connections between their own situations and the video movie they are viewing. This could be personal in the sense that they see a link between the cultural sensibility of the characters in the film and their own culture, or a direct inroad into their own immediate situation. Even hypothetical personalization in the sense of students being able to put themselves in the position of a character, to imagine what they would do and how they would feel, is an authentic line of study, and may indeed qualify as the highest level of interactivity.

### (viii) Student/Teacher Interaction

Whether it be in relation to selection or technique, the point of real communication must occur between teachers and students, and between the students themselves. With video movies as one of many possible foci for such interaction, this three-way process (teachers affecting students, and students affecting teachers, as well as each other) should be continually shaping all its participants.

## (ix) Target-mode Balance

One-track activities, such as listening-comprehension-only strategies, fail to exploit the multi-modal potential of video movies. Not only should activities achieve a balance of target modes--including picture, movement, language, sound and captions--but they should include techniques that actively involve students in building an awareness of the interplay and various relationships that exist between the different modes.

## (x) Whole Movie Approach

Well chosen scenes from different movies can be interesting and serve a limited purpose independently, but if communication is to be emphasized, the complete communicative process of a movie is in order as the vehicle for study. Especially if obsessive word-by-word study approaches can be avoided, then training students to develop gist understanding via key conversations and lines of dialogue instead will produce many extra opportunities for language development in every possible skill direction.

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