# Thinking outside the film

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The use of films within language classrooms has increased, as they seem to be motivational for learners; students frequently mention that they want to understand films without subtitles. Thus, teachers are creating classes and activities centred on feature-length films hoping that students can learn a range of skills and content. While whole films can be a good source of course material, this paper shares insights gained during a one-semester university course. The intent was to discover an effective method to increase students' understanding of situational discourse using a variety of short, unit appropriate film clips. The students were given pre-, during-, and post-viewing activities to aid their comprehension of the film clips and then asked to recreate the situation with their own ideas. This paper will describe the methods and activities used in the classroom.

　教室内での映画の使用は学習者への動機づけとなるため増加している。字幕なしで映画を理解できるようになりたいと、学生はよく口にするからである。そのため、教員は学生が様々な技能とコンテンツを学ぶことができるように、長編映画を中心にしたクラス活動を作成している。長編映画は教材の良い材料となり得るが、本論では、場面談話の理解度を増やすための効果的な方法を見出すという意図をもって、様々な言語的特徴と会話場面を実演している短いユニットの適切な映像を大学での1学期間のコースで使用した時に得た洞察を述べる。学生は映像理解の助けとなるように、視聴前、視聴中、視聴後のアクティビティが与えられ、その後、学生自身のアイディアで場面を再現することが求められる。本論は教室内でのその方法と活動について述べる。

## Introduction

### Using film clips in the classroom

At the beginning of each semester, many of my students often state that one of their objectives in learning English is to be able to comprehend English films without subtitles. It is both an ambitious and a difficult goal to accomplish. However, understanding films in English remains a legitimate desire. Films, then, can be employed by teachers to motivate students. This paper describes an attempt to incorporate the students' goals into the lesson content by adapting short film clips. A short film clip is a section or scene of a film, typically three to five minutes in length. Using whole films or short clips in any classroom, from L1 K-12 to adult EFL courses, poses challenges and raises questions that have been addressed by researchers across the field of language teaching (Cady, 1995; Furmanovsky, 1994; King, 2002; Shea, 1995,

Stempleski, 1994; Tatsuki, 1999). This body of scholarly research investigates methods, activities, and problematic issues found in using films in the second or foreign language classroom.

A majority of this research is concerned with whole films–either watched in small segments over a number of classes or seen as a whole. A limited amount of research (Moriguchi & Lewis, 1998; Shea, 1995; Stempleski, 1987; Sweeting, 2010) has been conducted on the use of short film clips in EFL contexts, and the bulk of this research has concentrated on intermediate or advanced learners, but little research has specifically considered film use with beginning or low-level students. The issue of when to introduce these kinds of authentic language activities remains unresolved. This paper describes research that considers how short film clips can be used as catalysts for role-play for students with relatively low levels of English in university classrooms in Japan. Conciseness is one of the advantages of using film clips; their length and linguistic features are less likely to overload low-level students. This study focuses on one short clip shown in multiple classes.

This research was conducted in a beginning level, English Oral Communication course during the students' first semester of university. The participants were typical Japanese students who had studied English grammar during junior and high school, but had low abilities in English speaking, listening, and writing.

Students first completed activities from the course textbook on topics such as ordering food and eating at a restaurant. Then, students were shown a film clip related to the situation. The purpose was to provide repetition of a situation using the target language. As the chapters varied by topic, so did the film clips. This paper explains how film clips were utilized in the university classroom as means of introducing role-play for low-level students.

## Literature review

Motivation is one of the most cited reasons for using film in the classroom (Shea, 1995; Sherman, 2003; Stillwell, 2009; Wood 1995). Students are engaged by films because they want to understand them. Students recognize that meaning is lost in translation, a dubbed version loses connotations of jokes, and that subtitles take attention away from the visuals. For students, films are a source of entertainment, but Shea (1995) emphasizes that it is important to avoid the "recipient" model of teaching in which students are simply vessels collecting language from a film instead of actively responding to it. One method of active response was examined by Casanave and Freedman (1995) who had students watch whole films to learn how to interpret them. The students, in groups, chose a film, watched it, interpreted it and had to explain the film to their classmates. This method incorporates both language and content teaching. Several authors (Shea, 1995; Walsh, 1998; Wood, 1997) discuss using films for a cultural content focus instead of a language focus, and Shea (1995) compares and contrasts both language focused and content focused methods and finds both to be useful.

Films, if not given a strong, supporting framework, can be overwhelming for low-level students. One method of reducing cognitive overload is to carefully divide a scene into manageable mini-scenes for the students to view repeatedly (Stillwell, 2009). Language the students have not studied, such as slang or colloquialisms, may be problematic; however, as Brown (2010) states, "a small amount of colloquial English mixed in with the basics has the potential to become an ingrained part of EFL" (p. 47). Using films to teach language often heard in films could be beneficial because it is authentic language. Furmanovsky (1996) insists that film clips shown to language learners ought to bear some relationship to the textbook the students are studying. Students' awareness of the topic and relevant vocabulary are essential preparation before watching the clip. Repetition of the

same vocabulary in the textbook and film clips can help comprehension.

Comprehension of films is a concern for teachers, and Tatsuki (1999) identified several problems for EFL students watching films in English. The main problems are acoustic and memory-based. Knowing these "hot spots", teachers can support film scenes to increase student comprehension. The memory-based problem stems from using an entire film; thus, short film clips with a thorough introduction to the setting can reduce this problem. To address the issue of acoustic difficulties, when pre-teaching vocabulary, students should be exposed to the native speed pronunciation. Realistically, students will not understand every word in a conversation, but as Wood (1997) argues, "at any level of ability, it is important to develop students' tolerance to ambiguity" (p. 105). Teachers occasionally need to allow students to struggle because they will often encounter ambiguities when listening to or speaking in a foreign language. One source of acoustic ambiguity often stems from the rate of speech, and it is perhaps the largest obstacle in understanding films for language students. Students need to understand that languages are spoken at different speeds and with different accents. Films provide a means of introducing these contexts and can help students attain an acceptable degree of listening skills enabling them to understand a variety of different speakers, e.g., native or non-native English speakers.

Recent literature concerning films in the language classroom focuses on class activities either using whole films or short clips. The specific literature regarding activities for using films in the classroom is abundant and too exhaustive to review here. For an overview, please see Brown, 2010; Shinohara, 1997; Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990; Sweeting, 2010.

## Method

In the first class of every English course I teach, I give a questionnaire to gather information about students' interests, especially regarding English learning, ability, and motivation. It serves as an assessment of students' needs, while also providing some insight into students' motivation. Often, students write they want to be able to understand "Hollywood" films without subtitles. This ability requires many skills significantly higher than most of these students' capabilities. However, since students specifically mention films, I attempt to include short film clips in each class.

This study was conducted during the students' first year and first semester of university. This course was taught in a room that was equipped with speakers, projector, and screen; the videos belonged to the teacher and were shown using a laptop computer. The topics included restaurant language, (*Little Miss Sunshine* and *Garden State*), describing locations (*The Gods Must Be Crazy*), and describing emotions (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding*). The focus of this paper is the restaurant language unit.

The course reviewed basic structures of English including comparatives, expressions of likes and dislikes, adverbs of frequency, and progressive tenses. Students were to learn language for situations such as ordering food at a restaurant, describing locations and emotions. Although there were twelve units in the in-house textbook, which provided vocabulary instruction and listening and speaking dialogues, only three film clips were used. The film clips were used as an extra source of input.

## *Participants*

The participants of the study were all first year, first semester Japanese university students, majoring in Elementary Education, and most of them began studying English in junior high school. There were 29 students (8 females and 21 males) in this

required Oral Communication class taught twice a week at a university in Osaka. The students' TOEFL scores were in a range from 310 to 677. Although these students will be required to teach English in the future, their motivation and ability in English were assumed to be fairly low.

### Criteria for choosing film clips

Some basic guidelines for choosing film clips are provided by Stempleski (1994) and Arcario (1992). The main criteria for selecting scenes for this course were theme and language. Situations had to be realistic circumstances students might encounter while travelling or living abroad. Following Allen (1986), who asserts that films demonstrate real world language demands, one criterion was that the movie be set in modern day and should realistically depict every day human activities; no fantasy or science fiction films were used. For this study, two film clips were utilized, each demonstrating one scene using language to order food in a restaurant.

In addition to depicting the chosen situation, the film clip needed to present the target language, be less than five minutes in length, not have content referring to other scenes in the film, and have fairly appropriate language in terms of not using too many profanities. This was a major challenge, as there is a trend to use expletives throughout films. Although this type of language was generally avoided, if a film clip proved to be a good example of a situation, the film was used regardless. If the students asked about a profanity, they were told of its use, its connotations, and its inappropriateness in certain settings.

### Steps of the procedure

The students studied the textbook unit to learn the setting, vocabulary, expressions needed for the situation. Next, the film was introduced using a PowerPoint presentation with pictures of the characters and setting. The students were taught expressions or colloquialisms used in the film to maximize comprehension in the first viewing of the film. After the first viewing, the class summarized the scene. During subsequent viewings, students filled in a cloze exercise focused on the target language. After reviewing correct answers, students did a group activity, followed by a role-play creation. The students rehearsed and performed the role-play. Finally, students viewed the film clip again and did the cloze activity again to conclude the unit. This procedure can be applied to many units: shopping, introductions, jobs, sports, daily activities, problems, appearances, or vacations.

### Restaurant procedure

Participants viewed three film clips during the semester, each film clip highlighting different language situations as well as grammar and expressions used in those situations.

A clip from one film, *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton & Faris, 2006) was used in coordination with the textbook chapter on food, dining, and restaurants. The textbook activities reviewed pertinent vocabulary, and included listening, writing, and speaking exercises. Students completed the textbook unit and were briefly lectured regarding seating, ordering, and paying processes that typically occur in restaurants in the United States. A PowerPoint presentation introduced the film's situation, characters, and vocabulary the students needed to understand this specific clip. The students then watched, without subtitles, the five-minute scene depicting a family eating at a restaurant; afterward, the class verbally summarized the scene. During the second viewing, students were given a cloze worksheet that reviewed the language and expressions studied in the textbook. Afterward, the answers were given and the students watched the scene one more time.

In the subsequent class, the students were put into groups of four, given paper and the following instructions: create a restaurant name, theme, and location (not in Japan), and draw the front façade of the building. Second, they were told to create a ten-item English menu. Finally, they were instructed to write a conversation between a waiter and three customers.

The students were given one class period (90 minutes) to create the menu, façade and conversation, which were checked by the teacher. The following class, the students refined their restaurants' menus and conversations. They then practiced the conversation between customers and a waiter multiple times. In the next class, the students role-played the scenario. Students with stronger English skills were selected to be waiters first, seating and taking orders from the other students visiting the restaurant. The scenario was repeated until a majority of the students had practiced both roles and the students were no longer using notes, which were provided in the beginning by the teacher via a PowerPoint slide.

During the role-play, students watched a scene from *Garden State* (Braff, 2004) depicting the main character as a waiter who was taking orders from patrons at a restaurant. The students saw that the customers and waiter had a problem, and the students were asked, "What could the waiter do?" Students brainstormed several solutions and briefly discussed them. The students were told that role-play customers needed to experience a problem, and the student waiter had to think of possible solutions. The role-play continued in this unscripted fashion.

In the final class, the students were shown the *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton & Faris, 2006) scene again and asked to fill in the same cloze exercise. Although the students had seen the clip three times before, it was two weeks prior to the final viewing. Only once did the students view the clip with the correct answers in front of them. The two classes after the first viewing provided students with the opportunity to learn and practice the language and expressions, making the final viewing more comprehensible.

## Discussion

### Students' response and motivation

During the first viewing of the film clip, the students were quiet and could not comprehend all the language in the scene. During subsequent viewings, the students seemed better able to understand. Initially, in the role-play, students relied on the PowerPoint slide for basic vocabulary. After two rotations, the students looked less often at the slide and the students laughed frequently and seemed to enjoy the task. By the fifth rotation, the students were not using the slide at all. When students were asked to make up problems for the waiter to solve, they did their best to trump other students in the creativity of their problems. The waiters dealt satisfactorily with the problems presented. After the final viewing of the film clip *Little Miss Sunshine* (Dayton & Faris, 2006), the students' immediate completion of the cloze worksheets showed the students' improved ability to comprehend and understand the language.

Although, prior to entering the university, the students studied appropriate grammar and vocabulary for the situations in which they would need to speak, their ability to hold conversations was inadequate. In the first class, these students said they had no use for English in their lives; they could find no purpose for it. Upon the introduction of films in the classroom, a noticeable change in the students' attitude was evident. While the students did the textbook exercises without much enthusiasm, during the restaurant role-play, they were animated, lively, and on task. By the end of the class, the students saw the practicality of the language and seemed to find the film clip an engaging means of language study.

## Advantages of film clips

The main advantage of using short film clips is their length. Clips that are a maximum of five minutes in length do not consume a large amount of class time. The English Oral Communication class used a general textbook that covers many of the basic situations that short film clips portray. Most universities offer a similar basic oral communication course, so these materials, once created, could be implemented year after year. This is the second advantage–the materials are easily reused in the future. Should the clip become outdated, there are numerous new films depicting similar situations. Also, the abundance of films allows students to compare and contrast differences in language between the situations.

By using films, students can be motivated to learn about something they have stated they have interest in, and the students can begin to see the value of English class: to successfully navigate a communicative situation as well as to help understand films.

Finally, using short film clips inspires the students' imagination. The problem-solving activity during the restaurant role-play provided the students with a realistic dilemma; both customers and waiters had to be creative with language. Successfully finding solutions connects to the third advantage: confidence building. The repetition of the role-play allowed students to become familiar with the language. After enough practice with the controlled language, students were able to make orders without any aid.

## Difficulties with using film clips

The initial work of choosing clips, typing up the scripts, and compiling material can be time consuming; however, once completed, these materials are reusable.

Another difficulty is the students' cultural background. For example, during the restaurant scenario, the students were asked to complain about the food and have the waiter change their order. At first, the students had a difficult time with this task. They had never been taught to complain; they were unaware of the appropriate etiquette, vocabulary, or coping mechanisms.

Setting up the background of the film may be accomplished through PowerPoint, but each small clip has to be appropriately and thoroughly introduced to the students. For comprehension, the students might need to be informed of the location, characters, and, occasionally, the events which happened prior to the scene. When choosing film clips, the clip should be short and focused on the language needed to complete the task. Film clips with dialogues about other events in the film may detract and discourage students. If the film clip language is too complicated and disconnected from the actions of the characters, the final task will be unclear to students. If the students do not understand the situation, the written conversation between customers and waiters may be inaccurate.

## Conclusion

The intention of this study was to discover how, using film clips, students can learn language needed for realistic purposes. These film clips, if properly reinforced, can serve as catalysts to help foreign language students to understand and use the language studied. Films can enhance the use of textbooks by showing students the purpose of the language. The main benefit of using film clips is that it may allow students to watch movies without subtitles. This approach can gradually help them achieve their goal. It can also be an effective means of engaging all students in classroom activities using authentic materials.

## Further studies

Naturally, there may be various other approaches and methods which could provide different insights into the results. A future study could collect empirical data to find out how the use of film clips aids students' language ability over a period of time. The study discussed in this paper progressed over five class periods. This would not be possible in a typical university course in Japan, which usually consists of only 15 classes. Future studies could include similar tasks but planned only for two or three classes. Another technical feature that could be used in future studies is software that slows down the rate of speech in video clips. Current developments allow for the reduction of film speed to about 80%; this speed neither slows down the action significantly nor does it alter the voices in the film clips. Allowing students to watch video clips first at a reduced speed and later at the natural speed could provide insights into the ways to help students develop their listening fluency. While some textbooks contain film materials, this investigation is to aid teachers who wish to make authentic materials more accessible to students.

## Bio data

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