Exploiting Movies Effectively

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This paper offers teachers practical advice on how to effectively use movies to teach EFL. This is achieved by describing the design and implementation of English Through Film, an elective language course at a university in Japan. The syllabus for the course centres around four feature films, combined with newly emerging Internet and computer technologies, to provide students with a rich, stimulating, and diverse program of study. A brief explanation of the educational context is followed by details of and rationale for the course objectives. An overview of the syllabus design is then presented along with a description of how course content is mediated and distributed to students. Finally, some language-learning activities used in the course are described in detail.

この論文は、外国語としての英語を映画を通して効果的に教える際の、教員への実践的アドバイスについてまとめたものである。ここでは日本における某大学の『映画で学ぶ英語』という選択授業のデザイン等を説明する。この授業でのシラバスは4本の　映画を取り上げ、インターネットやコンピュータ技術の新しい手法を使って学習者に内容豊かで刺激のある学習を提供することに焦点をあてている。授業目標の詳細　等に続いて簡単に教育環境についても説明を加える。授業内容がどのように学習者に提供されたのかとあわせて、シラバスデザインの概要も説明する。最後にこの選択授業での言語学習活動の詳細についてまとめる。

Movies represent a highly engaging and motivating pedagogic resource, offering an abundance of teaching opportunities. Rather than a mere source of supplementary listening material, they can comprise the core component of a language course (Sommer, 2001). One of the most significant advantages offered by films is that they provide contextually embedded models of spoken interaction. Although movies are produced for dramatic effect, the context and dialogue they contain are often formulated to closely resemble real life. Movies therefore give language learners access to realistic social settings and the opportunity to examine the communication dynamic between native speakers in the cultural environment of the target language (Stempleski, 1992; Telatnik & Kruse, 1982). Learners can relate such exchanges to comparable situations in their own lives, thus providing powerful motivation for students to engage with the material (Mirvan, 2013).

In this paper, I describe English Through Film, an elective language course at a large university in Japan. A danger of using movies to teach language is that students remain passive throughout and are denied the opportunity to practice and internalise input from the movies they watch. This course avoids this trap by combining movies with a highly communicative and student-centred

teaching philosophy. The following sections offer practical advice and ideas for teachers on how to exploit movies effectively. Although specific movies from the course are used to exemplify many of these ideas, the reader will find the methodology widely applicable to most movie resources.

Context

English Through Film is one of around 50 elective English language courses offered through the language centre of this particular prominent university in Japan. Classes are 90 minutes long, taking place twice a week over a 15-week semester. The course is a popular choice and is usually fully subscribed with around 50 participants. Students are mostly Japanese native speakers, with classes typically containing from 3-10% non-Japanese students, usually from Middle Eastern countries (such as Saudi Arabia and Oman) or China. The English proficiency level of students ranges from approximately A1 to A2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (TOEIC 400-500).

Course Objectives

Language

Because movies are such a rich linguistic resource, they offer excellent language-learning potential. The primary goal of using movies is to develop students' overall English language ability. First, movies are used for language skills practice. For example, using films can help students make significant progress with their listening skills (Egan, 2003). While watching a movie, students actively listen to the dialogue, and a significant advantage is that visual cues, such as body language and facial expressions, can aid students' comprehension (Allan, 1985).

Second, movies can assist in the acquisition of new vocabulary. Each film has its own lexical set, which can be the focus of learning activities. In some cases it might be desirable to preteach vocabulary items in order to facilitate student understanding of a movie. Alternatively, a teacher may wish to examine particular words of interest after watching a film in class, thereby giving students the chance to learn new vocabulary and understand the storyline better. Finally, movies can be used as a starting point for the study of grammar. By closely examining a movie script, student attention can be drawn to various structural aspects of language.

Life Skills

As well as linguistic objectives, there are a number of secondary goals of English Through Film. These are to develop students' interpersonal skills and critical thinking ability and to encourage greater self-awareness and personal growth. As the course uses a communicative language teaching and task-based approach, students continually interact with each other in pairs or small groups. For example, in the movie project students work together over a number of weeks to create their own short movie. The task is particularly complex, requiring students to coordinate their time and resources effectively as a group. In addition, many of the activities in this course encourage the development of student critical thinking skills. For example, after each movie, students are required to write a movie report for homework. In this report, they are asked to reflect on how the plot relates to their own knowledge or experience. Another aim of this course is to foster personal growth and self-awareness through a number of drama-based activities, such as role-playing.

Knowledge and Understanding

As well as developing language ability and certain life skills, the course also aims to increase students' understanding of wider issues. An additional objective is for students to become more familiar with cultural, historical, and political issues. Feature films come with a given context, which can be readily exploited for this

purpose. For example, the customs depicted in movies are often culturally specific to the setting of the film. These can be highlighted and contrasted with customs in the students' own culture. Most movies abound with references to fashion and music, attitudes and values, and the political climate, any of which can be used as a contextual springboard for a more in-depth exploration in the form of a presentation or project work. Using movies offers the opportunity to broaden student understanding of a variety of useful and relevant topics.

Syllabus Design

The course content of English Through Film is delivered to students in a number of ways. The classroom is fitted with a computer, DVD player, a large screen, projector, and high-quality audio. As well as the movies themselves, class activities and materials are also presented on the large screen using presentation software. There are numerous advantages to presenting material in this way. First, students' heads are up and looking to the front, rather than looking down at their textbooks. Second, it is clear to all students which activity the class is working on at any given moment, reducing the possibility of confusion. Third, by embedding audio into presentations, the teacher need not bring additional equipment such as a CD player to class. Finally, the textbook material can be modified and enhanced as the teacher sees fit. For example, additional images, audio and video can be sourced and inserted into presentation slides.

A class Moodle site, a learner management system (LMS) that can be accessed online, is used to distribute materials, assign homework tasks and quizzes, and set up discussion forums. Quizlet (http://quizlet.com/), a free Web 2.0 digital flashcard application, is used to study vocabulary. The syllabus itself is divided into three parts: intensive viewing, extensive viewing, and the movie project, accounting for roughly 40%, 40%, and 20% of classroom time respectively.

The intensive-viewing strand centres on the textbook *English Grammar in Focus* (Hamada & Akimoto, 2010). The book is based on the movie *Notting Hill* (Kenworthy & Michell, 1999), a British romantic comedy starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant. The text is divided into 12 units, each focusing on a 5- to 10-minute instalment of the movie. Each of the textbook units progresses from vocabulary and context-setting activities to viewing and comprehension. Exercises then focus on listening for details and expressions and then on a functional grammar point based on an example lifted from the movie clip. Units usually finish with more expansive, freer activities, often relating to society and culture.

It is important to note that subtitles are not used. These instalments are viewed without subtitles for a number of reasons. First, because the clips are relatively short, students can be expected to maintain their concentration on the dialogue for the duration of the instalment. Second, the listening activities from each unit use snippets of dialogue from the related clip. Therefore, if students read the subtitles before doing the listening exercises, they will have read the answers in advance. Finally, using subtitles runs the risk of turning the experience into a reading activity and denies students the opportunity to practice their listening skills.

The second strand of the syllabus is the extensive-viewing component. During the semester, students watch three other movies, viewing each over a four-class cycle (see Figure 1). Unlike *Notting Hill*, these movies are watched in only two instalments with English subtitles. Subtitles are included here because the movies are watched in 45- to 70-minute segments. It is unrealistic to expect students to be completely focused on listening to the dialogue for such an extended period. Subtitles, therefore, function as comprehension support. Students are encouraged primarily to use their ears, reading the subtitles to confirm or support their understanding when necessary. Activities relating to extensive viewing focus more on global understanding and skills fluency.

The first class of the cycle consists of pre-viewing exercises and the fourth contains post-viewing activities. Pre-viewing exercises typically include vocabulary building, prediction, and establishing context. Post-viewing activities usually include critical discussion or role playing. After each film, an online comprehension quiz is administered via Moodle, and a written movie report is assigned as homework. The movie reports are a minimum of 400 words and three paragraphs long. The first paragraph is a summary of the movie plot. The second paragraph is an analysis of a character of the student's choosing. In the final paragraph, students are required to relate the movie to their own life experience or existing knowledge in some way. The progression of these three paragraphs from a scaffolded reporting of details to a more inferential and personalised orientation helps students to explore issues increasingly critically and from a variety of angles.

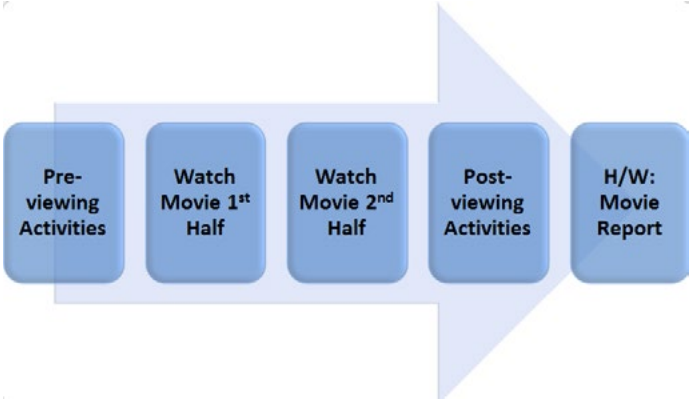

Figure 1. Extensive viewing cycle of a single movie.

As already mentioned, a problem with watching movies in class is that students may remain passive. Indeed, it might be argued that having students spend about 7 hours in class watching movies is an inefficient use of class time and that it would be better for students to do this as homework. However, in this case, many students would simply neglect to watch the movies, rendering much of the coursework largely meaningless for them. Additionally, the time assigned for homework from the movie reports and the movie project far exceeds those 7 hours of in-class viewing.

It is vital to choose movies which will be engaging for students. Doing this greatly increases students' motivation (Kusumarasdyati, 2004; Lonergan, 1984), and the choice of movies also dictates much of the course content. After consulting with a range of personal and professional contacts on this issue, I selected *Leon the Professional* (Ledoux & Besson, 1994), *The Matrix* (Silver, Wachowski, & Wachowski, 1999), and *Back to the Future* (Spielberg & Zemeckis, 1984) for the extensive-viewing component of the course. The aim was to include movies from a range of genres, contexts, and cultures. Positive student feedback and the high level of engagement and effort from many students seem to reflect the degree to which they have enjoyed these movies.

After watching several films, students are then tasked with producing one of their own. The last 4 weeks of the course are taken up with the movie project (see Figures 2 and 3). Groups of between four and six individuals collaborate to produce their own short film. Students are instructed to choose a movie scene from one of the movies watched during the course or any other movie they wish. The only selection criteria imposed is that scenes contain mostly dialogue and run for between 4 and 5 minutes. Students then delegate roles and responsibilities such as filming, editing, and acting. The groups are informed that the finished movie projects will be viewed together in class. The majority of groups use a smart phone for filming and then upload the files to a larger device, such as a tablet or PC, for editing. Students are provided with access to a range of free web-based resources via the course Moodle site, including movie clips, scripts, and soundtracks. In addition, students are directed

to free editing software apps and Web 2.0 multimedia applications, such as YouTube Editor (https://www.youtube.com/editor/).

Each project group introduces their clip to the rest of the class, explaining why they chose their particular scene, the difficulties they overcame during filming and editing, and finally, what they learnt during the film-making process. All movie projects are uploaded to YouTube and embedded in the class Moodle page. The final reaction task is done as homework. Students are asked to watch each clip again, make a 30-word comment including their name, and complete an online survey asking students to rate each clip on the following criteria: acting, English, soundtrack, editing, costumes, and overall enjoyment. During the next class, an awards ceremony is held using data from the online survey, with groups making acceptance speeches prepared in advance of receiving their awards. The movie project procedure is represented in Figure 2.

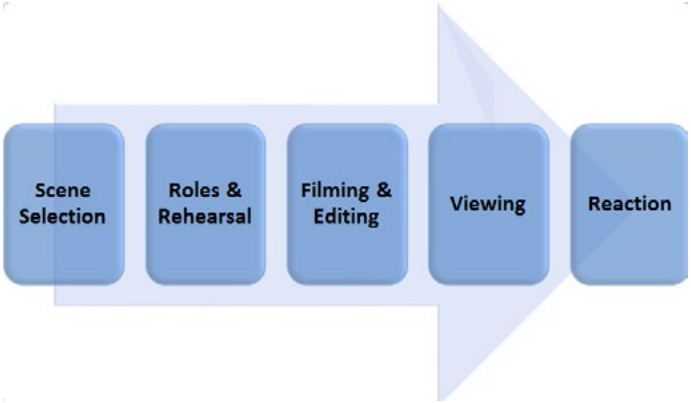

Figure 2. The movie project procedure.

Classroom Activities

The following sections include a selection of activities from English Through Film. These activities have proven to be particularly effective in terms of achieving a high level of student engagement and in meeting the teaching objectives. These activities are divided into pre-viewing, while-viewing, and post-viewing categories. Although many of the examples are specific, the methodology is applicable to most movies.

Pre-Viewing Activities

The goal of the pre-viewing activities is to establish context and to encourage predictions about a movie in order to activate students' schemata connected to relevant topics. This helps students understand the movie when they begin watching it.

Vocabulary

A lack of knowledge of specific vocabulary relating to a particular movie can be a significant barrier to comprehension. English Through Film students study associated vocabulary using an app for their mobile phones called Quizlet (http://quizlet.com/). For example, before watching *The Matrix*, students work with specialised information and technology-related words used in the movie (e.g., *hacker* and *cybercrime*). The ease of access to pre-existing decks of digital flashcards (via personal computer or mobile device), the variety of engaging study modes, and Quizlet's user-friendly interface make the platform an efficient means of vocabulary acquisition, amenable to a spaced-learning approach (Ashcroft & Imrie, 2014). Many students have reported that learning related vocabulary beforehand aided their understanding of the movies and that they found the Quizlet study app convenient and motivating to use.

Setting Context and Activating Current Knowledge

In everyday life, people invariably have some idea of the context in which language is being used. As a result, understanding spoken L2 can be very challenging. Requiring students to do this without any contextual information compounds this difficulty, and because it does not reflect real life, it is somewhat unfair. The beauty of movies is that once underway, the context for each successive scene has already been established by the preceding material. However, by setting a firm context for a movie before the students start to watch it in a foreign language, we can greatly assist students' comprehension.

Prior to watching *Back to the Future*, students are asked to research the USA in 1955 and 1985 in terms of fashions, social norms, technology, politics, and popular culture. Pairs of students present their findings to the rest of the class using 10 presentation slides, each displayed for only 20 seconds before moving automatically to the next slide. This format, known as *pecha kucha,* meaning "chit-chat" in Japanese, has a number of advantages. First, it helps students to focus on the content of their message by restricting the number of slides used. Second, it requires students to be concise because they only have 20 seconds to talk about each point. Third, it provides a supportive scaffold for weaker students. If a presenter falters, a significant pause in the flow will be avoided as the next slide will soon appear, and the speaker will be prompted to continue. Finally, by limiting presentations to only 3 minutes and 20 seconds, the *pecha kucha* format prevents running over time. This can aid lesson planning and class management, especially with larger groups.

In an activity used to introduce the context of the *The Matrix*, students are encouraged to consider the life of our distant ancestors. Four images of life during the Palaeolithic era are shown, and students are tasked with coming up with a category name for each picture. Suggested answers are elicited from the class, with the target answers included by the teacher (i.e., *work*, *communication*, *transport*, and *home*). Images for the four categories, this time from during the height of the Roman Empire, are then displayed. Students decide on a rough date for the scenes (i.e., 2000 years ago). The process is repeated, with images from 100 years ago and from the present (see Figure 3). By this stage, students are aware of the sense of progress associated with the successive sets of images. Small groups are then handed a sheet of paper divided into four quadrants, each representing one of the categories referred to above. Students attempt to imagine life 100 years into the future in terms of the four categories. Groups represent their ideas in pictures and finally present to the rest of the class. This activity encourages critical and imaginative thinking, team working, and discussion. In the process, learners practice their listening, speaking, and presenting skills. It also serves to activate students' knowledge and understanding about technological development, making them more receptive to the context and story of *The Matrix*.

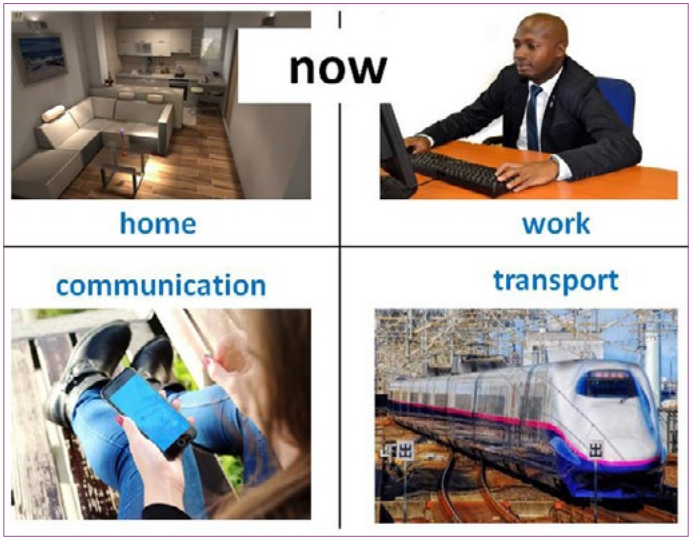

Figure 3. Context-building activity for *The Matrix.* Images from the public domain.

Prediction

Prediction is a useful skill to apply when approaching most texts. It helps to activate related knowledge and subsequently aid comprehension when it comes to reading. This is equally true in regards to film. An effective way to have students make predictions is to play an opening scene without visuals. Students use the noises, music, or dialogue to imagine what is happening. Conversely, visuals can be used with no sound, with students imagining the noises, music, and dialogue accompanying the visuals. Another way to stimulate prediction is by showing a movie trailer. Students speculate about the genre, plot, characters, and context.

Viewing

The film in the course textbook, *Notting Hill,* is watched in 12 separate instalments, usually with a week between the instalments. (The other movies are viewed in two instalments with three or four days between the first and second halves.) At the start of each class, it helps to have students recall the plot up to this point so that students can more readily assimilate events in the current instalment neatly into the freshly recalled narrative. There are the additional advantages of bringing absent students up to speed and clarifying points of confusion for those who have not fully understood what has come before. The following two activities have proved to be particularly useful.

Timeline

Students are presented with a list of jumbled significant events from the parts of the movie they have already watched and have to arrange them in chronological order. A more challenging variation is to give students a horizontal line running across the middle of a sheet of blank paper. The first event of the movie is given at the left side of the line, and the last event of the latest instalment given on the far right-hand side of the line. Students recall and fill in significant events in chronological order along the line. They can then check with other groups for missing details.

Bubble Diagram

This is a visual representation of events, characters, and objects from the movie and their inter-relationships. Students are told to use English, pictures, and colours. In contrast to the linear format of the timeline, the bubble diagram has the appearance of a network of relationships. Both formats can be used as a prop to help students narrate the plot of the movie in pairs or groups. Of course, these activities can also be used to good effect in the post-viewing stage.

Post-Viewing

As well as straightforward comprehension questions, administered through Moodle, the course includes a wide variety of post-viewing activities. A selection of these is outlined below.

Board Game

This activity has proven to be a particularly effective means of getting small groups of students to talk about a movie they have watched. Simply asking students to talk about the movie invariably leads to stalled conversations ending unsatisfactorily within a matter of minutes. A board game format, with counters and a die, provides a structure for the discussion by providing a steady supply of prompts for students to explore. The format deflects attention from the fact that students are actually having a conversation in English, thus alleviating pressure students may feel to perform. The board game should contain between 25 and 40 squares (see Appendix). Roughly half of these squares should contain generic prompts such as: “Which was your favourite scene and why?” The half-completed template can then be customized for any movie by inserting specific

prompts into the blank squares, as in the following example for *The Matrix*: "If you were Neo, would you have taken the blue or the red pill? Why?"

Back Translations

For this activity, a short movie synopsis is rendered into the learners' native language(s) using an online translation application, many of which are free. Students work in pairs to translate the synopsis back into English. The task is easier than it otherwise would be because students have already watched the movie. This activity has the additional benefit of highlighting the poor quality of machine translation and thus discouraging students from using it to cheat on written assignments.

Telephone

Students are divided into teams of between five and eight members. The first student is given a memorable line from the movie and allowed one minute to commit it to memory. The quote is then passed orally along each line from student to student, each whispering into the next student's ear. The presence of background noise is helpful for this activity because it prevents team members from eavesdropping on each other. The soundtrack of the movie in question works well for this purpose. As feedback, team members are challenged to remember the movie line they heard and awarded points based on how many students had passed along the message before it reached them. Bonus points can be given for follow-up questions about topics such as the speaker of the quote or the situation in which it is said.

Role-Playing

At the conclusion of the film *Leon*, one of the main characters is killed. For the role-play, students are asked to imagine that this character, in fact, survived. In groups of three, students role-play an interview between Leon and two police officers. Before getting into character, those playing Leon are given time to prepare for the interview by brainstorming anticipated questions and preparing answers. Similarly, groups of police officers draw up a list of interrogation questions for Leon. Students seem to have a lot of fun with this type of activity. Many commented on how much they enjoyed assuming the role of their character. Some even said that this process has allowed greater freedom to use the language more creatively.

Character Analysis

For this activity, students work in small groups to create a character profile of one of the movie characters. Students use their imagination, including details not explicit in the movie. For example they can consider a character's past experiences or what the character might like to do for fun. This project can then be written up or made into a presentation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that when exploited effectively and in combination with a variety of new technologies, movies are a stimulating teaching resource. In addition to providing students with valuable models of spoken discourse in a rich contextual setting, films represent a goldmine of sociocultural, historical, and political information that can be used as the basis for language study, vocabulary development, and skills practice. Rather than being simply a convenient option for a class at the end of term, movies can in fact form the central foundation of a course to develop students' language proficiency, interpersonal skills, team working, and critical thinking, while simultaneously increasing their knowledge and understanding of important historical, sociocultural, and political issues.

Bio Data

Bob Ashcroft is an associate professor of English at Tokai University in Japan. He has been teaching English since 1998, working in Poland, Germany, and Cambodia. He has a master's degree in Applied Linguistics and Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA). As well as using movies to teach language, his research interests include technology enhanced learning (TEL) materials and blended learning. <http://www.bobashcroft.com>

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Appendix

Board Game