

# Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



## Making the most use of one feature film

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Using films is one of the popular teaching approaches among EFL teachers. In fact, many educators and scholars argue for the advantages of using films in language classes, and a number of in-service teachers appear to use films for improving students' listening skills. Moreover, there are two approaches of using movies: one is using only segments of several movies and the other is using one entire movie. This article advocates for the approach in which a variety of language skills are taught with the use one entire feature film. The paper begins with an introduction and description of the film-based course I taught. This is followed by a report of some of the comments provided by the students who participated in the course. The paper ends with pedagogical issues to consider when using films in teaching EFL.

映画を利用した指導はEFL指導者に人気のあるアプローチの一つである。事実、多くの指導者や研究者はこの教授法の利点を主張しており、指導者の多くはリスニングの指導に利用していることが多いようである。また映画の利用方法については、いくつかの映画からターゲットとなるシーンのみを取り出し提示して指導する方法と、一本の映画全部を提示して指導する2つの方法がある。本稿では一本の長編映画を使用して、さまざまな言語スキルを指導する教授案について提案する。まず、実際に映画を使用して指導したクラスでのアクティビティを紹介し、次に指導を受けた学生の意見を報告する。そして最後にこの教授法の利点について論じる。

**T**eachers of English as a foreign language encounter a multitude of challenges often different from their counterparts who teach English as a second language. Among these challenges, motivating learners and helping them enjoy learning English are by far the most demanding. While searching for some ideas to motivate my students, I found that there are many educators and scholars (Baddock, 1996; Lin, 2002b; Loneragan, 1984; Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990; Stoller, 1988) who are interested in using films for language learning and teaching purposes. These scholars argue for the advantages of using films in language classrooms. Films have a greater potential to improve various language skills, including listening (Lin, 2002b; Muller, 1980), speaking and writing (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1989). They also provide authentic language in meaningful contexts (Baddock, 1996; Stempleski, 2001) and help learners retain language (Obari, 1996). In addition to language skills, proponents contend that using films can improve learner motivation (Lin, 2000a; Normand, 1980), maintain their attention (Balatova, 1994; Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990), and lower affective filters (Lin, 2002a).

This paper proposes a way to teach various language skills with the use of one feature film. First, I introduce and describe the film-based class and the teaching materials that were utilized. This is followed by comments on the course by the students who participated in the class. Finally, I provide a few pedagogical implications, which may be beneficial for English teachers who are considering using films in their future classes.

### Film-based class

The goal of the film-based class discussed in this paper was to improve learners' communication skills. The class was an elective course at the college where I currently teach. In this class, there were eight college-level students (2 females and 6 males), all of whom were majoring in engineering. These students were between 21 and 22 years old, and they were at an intermediate-level of English proficiency at the onset of the class. The class met once a week for 90 minutes over a 15-week semester. The materials used throughout the semester were one feature film, *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994), and the textbook, *American History in Focus* (Akimoto & Hamada, 2006), designed for a film-based class using *Forrest Gump*. The movie was divided into 12 segments, and students watched one segment lasting approximately 10 to 20 minutes in each session. In addition to watching a segment in each class period, the students completed vocabulary, listening, reading, and speaking activities that were related to each segment.

### Vocabulary

After the students watched the segment of the movie with English captions, they first engaged in the vocabulary activity. The following is an explanation of the procedures of this activity. First, I introduced the target words used in the movie segment the students watched, and then checked students' understanding of the meaning of each word. After the students were familiar with the vocabulary, they orally summarized the movie segment they watched using the target vocabulary. If summarizing the segment was too challenging for the students, they filled in the blanks of the summary that the textbook or I provided. Below is a sample summary from the textbook that was used, which the students completed using the following target vocabulary: *crooked*, *braces*, *stiffly*, *treated*, and *give in to*.

When I was a child, my back was \_\_\_\_\_. One day, she took me to the doctor, and he put special shoes and metal \_\_\_\_\_ on my legs. They were the first shoes I wore. Mama called them magic shoes because they could take me anywhere. Thanks to them, I could walk, although \_\_\_\_\_. Some people looked at me wonderingly or \_\_\_\_\_ me unfairly, but my mom was a very determined woman and wouldn't \_\_\_\_\_ such treatment. She explained to me that I was no worse than anybody else. Mama always had a way of explaining things so I could understand them. (Akimoto & Hamada, 2006, p. 3)

### Listening

For the listening activity, students watched the same segment without English captions, and filled in the blanks of the chosen expressions. The expressions for this activity were selected according to the features I wanted the students to focus on. For example, to help students focus on consonant-vowel linking, expressions including this particular pronunciation feature were chosen. The students listened and filled in the blanks. The following sentences are examples from the textbook used to teach consonant-vowel linking:

1. \_\_\_\_\_ there, boy.  
(Hold\_on there, boy.)
2. Death is \_\_\_\_\_ life.  
(Death is just\_a\_part\_of life.)
3. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ my word.  
(I'm\_a\_man\_of my word.)

### Reading

The third phase of each class session was a reading activity. The students were provided an article about the cultural or historical topic dealt with in the movie segment. Although there were articles about the target topics in the course textbook, I occasionally used authentic reading materials on the target topics from the internet, magazines and newspapers. After students read the article, they answered comprehension questions. When time permitted, instead of providing the article for the students, I occasionally asked them to search the internet for articles on the topic to share with the rest of the class, which seemed to be more motivating and meaningful for the students.

### Speaking

The last phase of each session was a speaking activity. Prior to each class session, the students were given discussion questions about the target topic that was to be discussed, which was the same topic as the one for the reading activity. They were asked to prepare for the discussion by writing their opinions on the different questions. These were not collected, but rather the intention was to get students to think about questions and prepare for the discussion. The discussions were carried out in a whole-class format. Although the topics dealt with in the movie were related to American culture or history, the discussion questions were designed to encourage students to think and talk about Japan and Japanese culture. For example, the topic dealt with in the second session was the Watergate Scandal, which was an American political scandal during the presidency of Richard Nixon in the 1970s. Based on this topic, the students were given questions such as “Who do you want the prime minister to be in Japan?”, “Can you think of any political scandals in Japan?”, and “Can you trust politicians? Why?”. In class, my role was that of facilitator as I wanted to avoid dominating the discussion or stifling students. I also tried to provide as many opportunities as possible for students to openly share their ideas with each other.

### Student feedback

In order to investigate the students’ opinions of this course, I conducted a survey with two open-ended questions: (1) What are the advantages of this class? and (2) What are the disadvantages of this class? The questions were written in Japanese and the students were asked to respond to the

questions in Japanese so that they would be able to fully articulate their opinions in their first language without any linguistic constraints. As mentioned earlier, there were only eight students in this course, and all of them responded to the questionnaire. Regarding the first question, I report students' comments by dividing their responses into three categories: (1) responses to the movie used in the course, (2) using movies in general for learning English, and (3) the activities used in the class.

Regarding the movie they watched in this course, the students mentioned that they liked *Forrest Gump* because it offered a variety of interesting American topics. Some students reported that they liked the story because it was a very heartwarming and touching story. Others wrote about the language used in the movie. They indicated that the vocabulary used in this movie was at an appropriate level for them and that the rate of speech by the characters was slow enough for them to understand.

In regard to using a movie as the main learning material, many of them agreed that it was beneficial for them because they were able to learn natural or authentic expressions. One student stated that being exposed to authentic language was challenging, but it motivated him to work harder. Many students seemed to be in favor of using movies for learning English because they were able to enjoy the story and learn English at the same time. One of the students said that it was good because he was able to test his English proficiency level by being exposed to authentic language in use.

Finally, regarding the activities, many of the students reported that they enjoyed the discussion activity the most out of all the other activities used in the class. Since the class

size was very small, the students reported that they enjoyed having many opportunities to speak and share their ideas in class. They additionally mentioned that it was helpful for them to think about their own culture and country by comparing it with different aspects of American culture that the movie provided. Furthermore, most of the students mentioned that having activities that focused on listening to specific dimensions of English pronunciation helped them raise their awareness and learn how these features are produced in natural speech.

While the students provide numerous comments on the advantages of this class, they provided very few negative comments. Among the few negative responses, some students pointed out that the class time was too short. They stated that it would have been more interesting if they had more time to share their ideas with each other during the speaking activities.

## Pedagogical considerations

### *Showing the entire movie over the semester*

The duration of feature films is a concern for teachers to consider because most feature films take more than two hours to finish (Lin, 2000a), while the average classroom time of Japanese college English classes is 90 minutes. Stempleski (2001) claims that "it is better to use a short segment of video thoroughly and systematically rather than to play a long sequence which is likely to result in less active viewing on the part of your students" (p. 365). Katchen (1996) argues that teachers should have students view an entire film at home or in the university multimedia center,

and not during the class session. Abridged films and film clips could be one of the solutions to this problem (Lin, 2000a). While these are possible options, many studies have shown that using an entire feature film over a semester has many advantages that cannot be overlooked. As Kiwamoto (2005) and Lin (2000b) have found, EFL students prefer watching an entire film to watching only selected scenes. Osuka's (2007) research indicates that using one feature film throughout a semester is more effective in enhancing learners' motivation.

Furthermore, King (2002) contends that this approach provides sufficient exposure to authentic listening and increases learner's pragmatic competence. Shea (1999) claims that showing an entire film leads students to recognize the "emotional and narrative dynamic of the video as a story about important things in human experience, aesthetic and ethical things like dreams, imaginations, and commitment; things that drive language and intimately stimulate students to learn it in the first place" (p. 14). In addition, watching an entire movie over a semester helps learners become familiar with each character's way of speaking and provide them with the schema to understand the story, which helps them to improve their listening comprehension as well as keep them engaged in class.

### Lesson planning

Although the class reported here used *Forrest Gump*, it is possible for teachers to utilize other movies to teach a variety of skills by using the following procedures. First, divide the feature film you want to use into 12 to 15 segments, according to the number of class sessions in the semester.

This will depend on the length of the movie; however, 10 to 20 minutes is an appropriate length for one session. Second, choose the topic dealt with in the movie segment. Third, select the target words used in the segment for the vocabulary activity. These words will be used by students when they summarize the story. Fourth, for the listening activity, choose expressions that include pronunciation features students should learn. For the reading activity, locate articles dealing with the selected topic from newspapers, the internet, and/or magazines, and then design comprehension questions. The last stage is to construct discussion questions on the target topic for students to discuss in class.

### Copyright issues

When using films in the classroom, one of the most important concerns is copyright issues. According to Shimizu (2006), it is permissible for teachers to use films in the classroom if the following conditions are met:

- (1) the film is used in the classroom of the school which is a non-profit organization and authorized by the Ministry of Education;
- (2) the teacher who is in charge of the class uses the film; and
- (3) it is already made public, such as DVDs.

To avoid violating copyright laws, teachers who intend to use films in the EFL classroom must not only adhere to Japanese copyright laws (Cabinet Secretariat, 2009), but they need to consider Shimizu's guidelines seriously.

## Conclusion

Since the class size was very small, there were many opportunities for students to use the language and interact with the teacher. This, however, may not be the typical situation in most Japanese classrooms. In reality, most Japanese English classrooms are relatively large. The large class size would make it difficult for teachers to interact directly with all of the students. In order to implement a lesson such as the one I described above in a large class, teachers will need to spend more time preparing for each lesson and more class time to complete each task. The class will need to meet for more than once a week for 90 minutes, and teachers will need to carefully design activities for pair and group work that encourage all students to be involved and engaged in each task. Developing such activities will encourage more student participation and encourage students to actively use and interact with the language.

In conclusion, the student comments indicate that this film-based course proved to be not only beneficial to their language learning processes, but also their motivation to learn English. Furthermore, with a little effort and preparation, this teaching approach can easily be applied to other feature films. The teaching ideas developed out of this film-based course have become an essential part of my teaching repertoire.

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