

English through movies

A few years ago while teaching at the high school level in Tokyo, I found my students lacked the motivation to tackle English as a school subject. At the root of the problem was their unwillingness to learn with traditional language learning methods and materials. Some claimed to be bored by written exercises or even pair work. They also expressed extreme dislike of any learning using their textbooks. In order to bolster motivation while at the same time bringing real language use into focus, I began using movies as a solution to the learning malaise.

My students immediately claimed to be relaxed with the learning situations that movies helped create. Unlike with the required textbooks, there was an immediate effect of taking students' needs and wants into consideration, since together we were able to reach agreement which videos to use from the school collection. From my perspective as teacher, there was also a very positive, communal feeling that came from the shared viewing experience. After watching something together, we often had very similar opinions concerning content, while the differences of opinion provided ample opportunities for lively discussion.

Basic Exercises

Although it took time and much effort, I began to work as much language learning as possible into the movie-related classes. First, I chose questions for pre-, during- and post-viewing, questions that were very similar to those you might find for a commercial video course. I made these questions suit a particular functional or thematic focus of my lesson. For instance, if the focus was the learning of greetings, I would ask students how the characters greet each other, in addition to finding out the character's names. I also used cross-words where students guess the answers, then try to find them in the movie. Or I had them do word-search puzzles to supplement the questions or in order to practice and build up vocabulary. Students also enjoyed answering multiple choice questionnaires, and the results were overwhelmingly positive in this regard.

However, I must note here, that, although many of the activities I have tried are in part inspired by those used in commercial video courses, I have chosen NOT to use such courses themselves. This is because they seem to chew the story up into too many pieces simply for a grammar-focused lessons, and thus they do not let the story get told. Also, I like showing movies that I have enjoyed in the past, and these may be titles for which no commercial materials are available. Getting the students reactions to and perspectives on the

movies that are my favorites often turns out humorous and helpful.

Expanding on the Basics at the Post-secondary Level

Although my teaching has made the transition to the tertiary level, I continue to use and develop language teaching and learning around videos. In order to challenge better my university students, I now include discussions to the exercises and activities I have described above. I formulate questions, opinions, and ideas about the movies in an effort to get students to discuss and communicate what they think and feel as a result of their viewing experiences.

If students find this pace suitable to their abilities, I then attempt the activity of script writing, perhaps generating four two-partner-type dialogues. I provide scripts of certain areas of the movie to help students get some idea of the continuity, as well as grammatical correctness, in movie dialogue (for one thing, much of the story line of a movie has to be revealed and told in the words the characters say). Having them finish writing the dialogue for scenes before showing the final parts also gives students the opportunity to see if they can get the English right. They can then check if their guess as to how the scene ends is on track. This activity can then lead to the making of a short video, even if only long enough to have students do something simple, like greet each other. This seems to add some vested interest to their lessons and has proven fruitful thus far. By showing silent movies or sequences without the sound, you can have the students try writing appropriate dialogue to fit the action. They can do group work correcting each other's output; the give and take of group work like this helps their general understanding of what took place in the film and uncovers more possibilities for use in their own conversational video productions.

Making Video 'Shorts'

And then when it comes time to attempt

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making video themselves students only need a camera and some blank tapes, usually collecting dust somewhere on your university campus. The university benefits from this type of activity as well, by getting some use out of school resources expensively purchased but perhaps hardly used. And while a video production these days doesn't need an elaborate work crew, some students can tackle acting roles, while jobs can be assigned for doing camera work, simple lighting, even make-up, wardrobe, or directing the whole shot. There is also an array of possibilities involved with preparing and editing the final product for viewing.

What Types of Films Do Students Want?

After taking a needs/wants analysis in the first school term, I found students lean more towards two types: action movies or love stories. With this in mind, I then had them vote on the appropriate final choices from the school collection. Sentimental romantic comedies, like those with Meg Ryan and/or Tom Hanks (e.g., *Sleepless in Seattle* or *You've Got Mail*) can, for example, be shown for the aforementioned Greetings lesson. Note that I chose to show movies with subtitles in their entirety for a first viewing. This is so language teaching and learning do not interfere with understanding and appreciating the story (which is, after all, the most basic reason we watch films). If a particular area of a film was of use for the lesson, I'd simply cue it up for discussion, trying to avoid going back too often to prevent the students from getting bored with repeated material.

Movies that received a warm response included these titles: *Toy Story*, *Dumb and Dumber*, *Dead Calm* and *Home Alone*—and almost anything that was recent and well known. Movies that may distract and detract from classroom learning would include anything too graphic in either acts of violence or sexual content. If you are unsure of a choice for your particular group of students, try consulting with colleagues at your school and in your department. ALWAYS preview a film thoroughly before showing it in class so that you know what scenes or language are inappropriate for the students. Including films from all over the world also illustrates to students that English is an internationally functioning language, and such films often include different pronunciation and usage than those found in most Hollywood productions.

The important point to the movie English lesson is that, as opposed to using only one movie broken up and stretched out over an entire course (which is typical of commercial ELT materials), a large variety of movies can be shown: silent movies for dialogue production,

Japanese movies for translation attempts, movies without subtitles to spot check comprehension, subject-specific films. Think how a "prepositions" lesson would go with Steve Martin's *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles* (or a travel-themed lesson, for that matter). There are many exciting possibilities to match favorite films and their standout scenes with cultural themes and language notions and functions. There truly is a mind-boggling plethora of other choices limited only by the teacher's imagination or a film's availability.

A Sample Basic Lesson Plan

My greetings lesson plan at the beginning of the term, using a random movie choice would look something like this:

Title: *The Black Robe*

(running time 2 hours=120 minutes)

Classes to complete showing: 3

Dates: March 3, 5, 10

Lesson title: #1 Names, greetings

1. Vocabulary; Crossword - Characters, title, greetings, hello, nice, meet, you
2. Review pre-movie questionnaire about names and greetings; -What's the title of the movie? -What are the main characters names? -How do they greet each other? -Do they shake hands?
3. Showing in entirety. Check movie questions together at the end of each viewing day.
4. Post-viewing questions. Discussion. -Did you like the movie? -What was the story about? -What happened at the end?

Conclusion

I am now building a second-year course curriculum at my university using movies as a basis, but teachers who are obligated to a particular textbook for a year should give the movie resource a try at least once in a school term, if only to relieve the stress felt by students from the unrelieved use of traditional methods. I found video production itself a good way of taking the English out of the textbooks and putting it into students' mouths. Students consider it a strong alternative to their past studies and take the lesson more seriously having a both cognitive and emotional interest in the process. The thing that surprises me most is the general consensus among colleagues that movies are a downtime resource, used to entertain, more than stimulate learning. I beg to differ. Movies enhanced the learning experience in my classes by (1) placing the English in context, (2) relaxing the students, (3) building their confidence, (4) allowing them to listen to and use real-time English, and (5) setting a common ground between student and teacher. ETJ