



# ON THE USE OF ENGLISH MOVIES AS EFFECTIVE TEACHING MATERIAL

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When teaching non-English majors English, what is of prime importance is that proper teaching materials be chosen in order to activate their class and attain some fruitful, pedagogical results. Students may fall asleep during the class if the teaching materials do not arouse students' interest, curiosity, or concern. While students are dozing away their time, they are, of course, attaining no aim of any given class. The same phenomenon may be observed when pedestrian instructions take place, but this is not our concern in the present paper.

When they are, however, responsive to the instructor and actively involved in class activities with full attention, students are getting maximum pedagogical results. What are, then, possible English teaching materials which can attract attention from most of the students? There may be quite a few, but I would like to propose a way of using movies as one of the most effective means of conducting English class. Not to mention the students, people of all ages and both sexes are "hooked" on movies because they can absorb a tremendous amount of knowledge of things such as human history, cultures, fantasy, ideals, and facts in the form of a combined art form: pictures, music, drama etc. are put together to make a whole. There are a variety of movies including comedies, musicals, documentaries, thrillers, chillers, dramas, science fiction films, disaster films, those based on history, etc. Although a great number of movies have been produced annually, it may be desirable to take up one

movie that has often been cited as a masterpiece from each of the above categories. The reason for this is that these movies have often become the subject of newspaper and magazine articles and hence are likely to appeal to students.

Basically speaking, there are two ways as to the use of these movies; that is, either using one complete movie or parts of many movies over a term. The majority of the students to whom I have shown the movies in the LL room seem to prefer the latter over the former. The discussion that follows, therefore, is to be concerned with the use of many movies over a school term. This paper is intended to shed some light on a way of using such English movies as useful teaching material from a methodological point of view.

## Summary of the Movie

Although students always want to enjoy watching the entire movie, it is not possible to accede to this request because of time limitations. Showing all the details of a movie in class will no doubt provide satisfaction to students, but that will not be able to develop their English ability efficiently. As a result, only an excerpt from the movie is to be taken up. In order for students to have a good overall comprehension of the movie, a fairly detailed explanation of the entire story is absolutely necessary to make up for the missing information. This can be done in terms of oral explanation, but a written

summary will be more appropriate because students can refer to it whenever necessary. Writing a summary of a movie is by no means an easy task, for it is time-consuming and requires careful attention. There are no hard-and-fast rules in writing a summary. What should be noted in writing the summary, however, is that it should be long enough to include information necessary for students to comprehend the movie. Conversely, if the summary is too long, it may diminish student interest in the forthcoming video excerpt of the movie. It should also be pointed out that impression, evaluation or criticism on the movie should not be made explicit on the part of the instructor; it should rather be left to the students; otherwise, they may be swayed by such sentiments.

### Questions Based on the Summary

Before showing the excerpted scenes to students, it may help students appreciate the movie more profoundly if some questions based on the summary are posed to them. Such questions can be given to students as a homework assignment or they can be given during the class hour.

Once the summary is available, it is not much of a problem to make questions. The nature of questions or the number of questions should vary according to the level of students and/or amount of time available. What is to be borne in mind, however, is that questions should be concerned with the main points of the story rather than minute details at this time. It may be worthwhile to ask things such as what the film is about and what happens to the main characters.

### Dictation-Cloze Exercises

One way of checking to what extent students understood the material through listening is to provide dictation-cloze exercises. The exercises can be best made out of the climaxes of the movie since they are

most likely to arouse student excitement.

After showing the climax on the video, it can be recorded on the students' tapes. Students are then requested to play their tapes individually and fill in the blanks on the prepared dictation-cloze handout. If the class is to be conducted in an ordinary classroom which is not equipped with audiovisual aids, such work must be, of course, carried out simultaneously as a group rather than individually.

It is natural to have a top-down approach in dealing with comprehension exercises, as well-known textbook writer Jack Richards argues. In the present method in which a summary is at hand for students to consult, a bottom-up approach can be employed as well, since a large amount of information has already been given to them. The reason for emphasizing top-down process is, according to Richards, that in actual conversations one is always attentive to a stream of thought, or main ideas, rather than to minute, detailed information. He also argues that the better speaker one becomes, the more likely it is that he uses both a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach. In the present discussion, however, both top-down process and bottom-up process can optionally be employed according to the level of students to reconfirm their grasp of the material.

It often happens that the recorded climax on the students' tape from the movie has long pauses between lines. This is annoying when listening to the tape because one can hear nothing but a long silence. If there are long pauses on the recorded audio tape, sentences explaining the situation should be written on the dictation-cloze exercise sheet to clarify the development of the scene together with the exercises. Conversely, there are certain situations in the climax in which characters exchange verbal duels so vigorously that it becomes extremely difficult to catch words. If such a problem arises, the following devices can

be employed to help students comprehend the script better:

1. The corresponding Japanese translation can be given.

If the space to be filled in is provided with the corresponding Japanese translation, students will be able to make a reasonable guess.

2. Try to match the number of blanks or parentheses with that of the missing words.

What is meant by the above method is that if students know the number of words to be filled in, they can take a reasonable syntactic guess.

3. Give a partial spelling of a word or words.

If students know, for instance, the initial letter of a word, they will find it quite helpful in getting the rest of the word or words.

4. If a group of words are to be tested, write out some words.

In comparison with content words such as verbs, nouns, adverbs, and adjectives, function words represented by conjunctions, articles, prepositions, etc. are not ordinarily subject to stress accent in the English language. As a result, the latter are likely to give trouble to students listening to the tape. Students may feel comfortable if such nerve-wracking grammatical words are provided.

Ideally, the instructor should go over the answers of the dictation-cloze exercises in class with the tape at hand and account for them from the phonological, semantic and syntactic points of view. If the explanation of the answers is carried out in isolation from the recorded tape, students may not be sure of the mistakes they have made.

It is often the case that the script includes jargon or slang expressions that are not taken up in the dictionary or ordinary textbook. One may argue, therefore, that it is not necessary to teach college students such vocabulary items. On the contrary,

however, many students are interested in familiarizing themselves with them. This is probably because they want to know "the other side of the coin." Since a large number of slang expressions are foreign to most of the students, it may be wise to give them notes in plain English. The words should not be tested in the exercises.

### Role Play

When the explanation of dictation-cloze exercises is fully given, the entire passage should be read by students until they feel comfortable. After that, they can be assigned roles to act out. While students are doing this exercise, the instructor can go around the room, check their English, and give them comments on their work. In pronunciation, he should pay more attention to students' rhythm and intonation than other phonological aspects of their English. Individual phonetic sounds can be, of course, corrected if students are using phonemes unique to the Japanese language such as [ϕ], [ç], [r] instead of using [f], [h], [l](r), respectively. Conversely, if they are having trouble with pronouncing [f], [v], [θ], [ð], [l], or [r] that are not existent in Japanese, the instructor should demonstrate how to make those sounds properly. This role play exercise will often create a lively class atmosphere. This is probably because the students feel fully involved in the class.

### Vocabulary Exercises

Since only the climax of the movie is under consideration in the present paper, many useful and interesting vocabulary items appearing in the movie are likely to fall into oblivion. To make up for this, however, some vocabulary exercises can be devised. Shown below is one such attempt devised from *Rocky*, which my colleague Fred Ferrasci and I have employed. Students are supposed to make a circle around the correct answer:

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1. We may do this to someone when we don't like him or want him to go away. One way of doing this is to frown at him and another way is to ignore his presence.

- a. do him a favor
- b. jab him in the head
- c. break his thumb
- d. give him the cold shoulder

2. This is a sportsman, like a baseball player or boxer, whose left hand is stronger than his right.

- a. southpaw
- b. pug
- c. underdo
- d. climber

The above exercise somewhat resembles the definition of a word in an English-English dictionary. Since the focus of attention in this exercise is on the word to be chosen, the directions and explanatory sentence should be easy enough for students to comprehend.

Here is another vocabulary exercise. After some expressions are accounted for, they can be tested in the form of an exercise. Let us consider the following example:

### Vocabulary

*for peanuts*: for a very small amount of money.

*go the distance*: to endure to the very end.

The expressions to be acquired are thus defined prior to the exercises. The exercise sentences can be made as follows:

### Exercises

I don't think he is a kind of man who can (     ) to attain his goal.

He is making every effort in order to be a successful businessman because he doesn't want to work (     ).

Students are asked to fill in these blanks with the words that have been defined previously.

As a follow-up activity, it may be of use to make composition exercises based on the tested items if time permits.

### Listening to Music

In mastering a language, listening to songs in that target language is quite effective in many ways. Music can not only ease tension, which often results from learning foreign languages, but make it possible for the learner to acquire naturally the linguistic elements such as rhythm, intonation and stress of the target language. Effects of music in acquiring languages have also been advocated pedagogically in a new discipline called suggestopedia in applied linguistics. Seven foreign language programs televised on NHK, including English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, Chinese, and Korean have made the best use of music. Insertion of music as such also gives variety to the program in addition to the effects mentioned above. If, then, music is somewhat included in teaching material connected with movies, one can expect to have more substantial educational effect than with material without music. However, if songs are to be used within the framework of the teaching material in question, they should not be given much weight in the text. If, for example, they are employed in the form of exercises, students would be overwhelmed by the amount of work and may be discouraged rather than be encouraged by music. In any event, music should play a subsidiary part in the material concerned.

### Some Cross-Cultural Aspects

Nobody can deny the fact that language reflects culture and vice versa. In acquiring any language, it is of prime importance to understand the culture behind it. In this

respect, using movies as teaching material is not far from ideal because with each glance at the screen, one can learn something of the manners, gestures, customs, way of life, etc. of the country. Through English movies, students will familiarize themselves with nonverbal communication among native speakers. However, if some aspects of cultural differences between the English-speaking country and Japan in the movie are taken up and are well explained to the students, the result will be increased student attention and a greater understanding of the culture of the country. Recently, a vast number of English books connected with cross-cultural topics have been published, and this phenomenon in the world of publication strongly substantiates the claim that learning culture is indispensable for the study of a foreign language: a mere user of any foreign language is biased and subject to friction, confusion and misunderstanding. According to the author's survey administered to students to find what aspects of English they are interested in, there was a sizable number of students wanting to learn cultures unique to the target language. It makes perfect sense to take up cultural aspects in the present material since they are not only indispensable for mastery of the target language but also a matter of concern and interest to students.

#### Problems in the Use of Movie Materials

There is no doubt that movies can be one of the most effective teaching materials, but there seem to be some problems as to how they can be integrated.

What we should bear in mind first in the use of movies is the types of movies students have craze for. It is not always the

case that the instructor's choice of the movies matches that of the students. To take an example, the author has once used *Ben-Hur*, which is presumably one of the greatest masterpieces in the history of screen, but very few students showed interest in it according to a survey of over 150 students.

In August, 1988, a moderately large English seminar designed for junior and high school English teachers took place in Beppu for the first time. There were some six native speakers of English and two Japanese as lecturers at the workshop. Taking advantage of the situation, a questionnaire concerning movies was given to the participants in order to find out what movies they are interested in.

The following month, the same questionnaire was given to engineering majors at Oita University, where I have been working as a part-timer, to find out what motion pictures students are interested in. The aim of doing such research was to shed some light on the difference between the taste of English teachers, who select teaching materials, and that of students, who are often disregarded in the selection process. Fifty world-famous movies, the majority of whom have won Academy awards, were carefully categorized and listed. As far as *Ben-Hur* is concerned, the results are summarized in the table below.

A represents a rating scale ranging from excellent to very bad. That is to say, 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 means excellent, good, fair, poor, very bad, respectively. The question mark means that the subject does not know enough about the movie to make a judgement. B stands for the number of people making each judgement.

	teachers							students					
A	5	4	3	2	1	?		5	4	3	2	1	?
B	41	26	12	4	0	26		5	13	26	16	5	92

## English Movies as Teaching Material

To recapitulate what the table indicates, 41 out of 109 English teachers (109 is the total number of teachers who completed the questionnaire) said that *Ben-Hur* is excellent whereas only 5 out of 157 students replied that the same movie is excellent. A striking fact is that 92 out of 157 students did not even know the movie.

This is just an example showing that there is a serious discrepancy in movie tastes between teachers and students. Since the choice of movies greatly affects student enthusiasm for their class, it should be well considered. It is needless to say that no matter how high student ratings may be, movies full of obscenities or empty in content should be avoided.

It is not uncommon to find college students working part-time at nearby video

rental shops. They have a good knowledge of films. Some students pay frequent visits to such shops to watch video movies in small rooms available there. Other students may enjoy watching rented video films using their own video recorder. Almost all college students nowadays have some kind of cassette recorder, and an increasing number of students have a video deck as well. It is important to lend an ear to students in selecting movies, but care should be taken for the reasons mentioned above. The fact that a movie appeals to students does not always mean that it can be good teaching material. The ideal selection of movies will be made possible when attention is given to both the taste of students and that of teachers.