

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

Yoshiko Takazawa

Abstract

Movies have proven to be an excellent foreign language teaching material. When used appropriately they not only help cultivate communicative competence but also promote intercultural understanding. Through the use of movies, language learners are exposed to both verbal and non-verbal communication in the context of the target culture. This paper deals with movie-based learning techniques and then goes on to present an example of a course syllabus that uses a movie as its main teaching aid. The example includes how the writer selected the movie as well as sample lesson plans.

I. Introduction

Cultivating English proficiency, rather than English knowledge in general, has been advocated in English education for quite some time now. The Japanese Ministry of Education (Mombusho) made its fifth revision of the "Course Study" in 1989, which was consequently put into practice in 1993. One of the critical points of the revision was the goal of cultivating students' communicative competence in English while simultaneously cultivating a foundation for international understanding. The achievement of this goal is proving to be quite time-consuming and instructors continue to look for better ways to

attain it.

International understanding cannot easily be fostered without some kind of intercultural understanding and both of these relate to communicative competence in a foreign language. H. D. Brown states that "Culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language." We need to understand other cultures in order to be able to understand the people of those cultures and in order to be able to communicate effectively with them.

Because of the unique relationship between language and culture, it has been said that the "most successful language learners are able to take on the 'mindset' of the speakers of the second language, assuming the culture along with the language..." (Valdes, 1984). If this is indeed the case, then the best learning environment would be one that presents the target language as close to its natural cultural context as possible. Obviously the best learning environment would be the target country itself. If that is not possible, then the next goal would be to bring elements of the target country into the learner's environment. It is the writer's opinion that an effective way to teach a language within the framework of its own culture (in this case the English language and the American culture) is through the medium of movies.

II. Movies as a teaching material

It is the writer's contention that using movies, and/or video films, as English teaching material can help cultivate communicative competence and promote intercultural understanding at the same time. Stempleski

(1990) comments that "This combination of moving pictures and sound can present language more comprehensively than any other teaching medium. And more realistically too. Using a video sequence in class is the next best thing to experiencing the sequence in real-life." The communicative value of video films is in the combination of sound and vision, and viewers/language learners can easily perceive various factors such as facial expressions, actions and behaviors, gestures, times and places and situations simultaneously with the conversation itself. They can understand culture through pictures. There are few things that can give more immediate impact than visual image especially when accompanied by a moving one (Cooper, et al., 1991).

Stempleski and Thomalin in their book *Video in Action* list four benefits to using a moving picture component in the classroom: motivation, communication, non-verbal aspects of communication, and cross-cultural comparison.

1. Motivation

The General Survey of English Language Teaching at Colleges and Universities in Japan makes the claim concerning audio-visual aids, that 67.7% of all students prefer using video and films in class as opposed to 57.5% who feel that listening only to tapes is too simple and monotonous (Koike, 1985). Results of a needs analysis by H. Tsukagoshi (1995) show that 95.3% of the respondents favored the use of movies in the classroom. It seems clear then that students are favorably disposed to studying English through video films.

2. Communication

According to J. Lonergan (1984), the "ability to present complete

communicative situations is the outstanding feature of video films.” In being able to see and hear a complete communicative situation students have a better idea of appropriateness and language as used in real life. Even though the language is scripted they have a living model so to speak and this in turn gives them reasonably clear guidelines as to language usage.

3. Non-verbal aspects of communication

Non-verbal aspects of communication include body language (gestures, facial expression, spatial relations, etc.) as well as the use of props (clothes, objects) and other elements in the surrounding environment. Movies can thus be a valuable tool in interpreting these various elements. In fact, the ability to teach this aspect of communication may be the strongest selling point for using movies in the classroom. Birdwhistell (1974) claims that “the average American speaks for only ten to eleven minutes a day and that more than 65 percent of the social meaning of a typical two-person exchange is carried by nonverbal cues.”¹ An even stronger view is held by Robert Merabian, an American psychologist, who has estimated that “as much as 80 percent of our communication is non-verbal.”² This is something students need to be aware of if they are to be effective communicators. Also, movies not only present non-verbal cues as they occur naturally but any given frame can also be “frozen” for more in-depth study.

4. Cross cultural comparison

Through viewing movies the cultural aspect can be more easily understood. Students can look for similarities and differences between their culture and the target culture. They can also note

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

reactions of characters and compare how they would react in a similar situation and discuss why they think the characters act as they do. Furthermore they can compare what things are culturally acceptable in their culture as opposed to the target culture.

Having presented some evidence that using movies as a teaching aid can be beneficial in learning language and culture, it must be said that not all movies lend themselves equally to the classroom. Also, movies are not intended as a substitute for the teacher but rather as a tool for the teacher to use (Loneragan, 1984). As with the use of other tools, the teacher needs to know what type of movie and teaching method best suits their students. In light of this, what kind of movies should be chosen and how should they be taught?

III. Choosing the movie

As with any other teaching material the use of movies requires clear goals as to what needs to be accomplished in the class with the students. It is important therefore to know as much about the students as possible, what the time constraints are, and what goals you have in light of these factors. Based on this, movie selection is made and a course syllabus is drawn up. The following is a proposed curriculum based on the above-mentioned approach.

The students

We will imagine a typical teaching situation common to many Japanese junior college classes in which ninety percent of the participants are second year female junior college students in a low intermediate level English class. Students meet weekly for thirteen

classes of ninety minutes each. Students are expected to improve their ability to express themselves in English through a variety of activities while paying added attention to intercultural understanding. Although the degree of motivation may vary greatly in the class, the majority of students have expressed a desire to improve their English speaking ability. In spite of this, there is a general lack of confidence among the students in this regard.

Goals for the students

1. Increased cultural understanding through non-verbal cues

A principal goal is to foster an awareness that cultural understanding is related to language understanding and this is attempted by teaching students to look for gestures, facial expressions, spatial relationships, etc. Students compare meanings of various cues in their own culture and in the target culture and begin to see that they are not always the same, thereby increasing their knowledge of foreign culture.

2. Increased language understanding and usage

Students are expected to be able to understand key points of what is being communicated between characters in the film, to answer basic questions about the scenes (who, what, where, when) and to hold guided discussions with classmates. They are asked to be able to express opinions about characters in the movie and about themselves.

3. Increased motivation and confidence in learning/using English

Students are expected to show some interest in the movie itself, to interact with it and to participate fully in class. The aim is to have students learn American English and its culture through the

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

movie while appreciating the movie itself holistically.

Movie Selection

In light of the above three goals, it is felt that an appropriate movie would need to:

1. be sufficiently interesting for students to maintain their interest throughout the course.
2. contain abundant dialogue suitable for students.
3. employ relatively standard American English, rather than use of less-familiar dialects or accents.
4. discuss several social issues, preferably of special interest to women.
5. be short enough to be finished within one semester.

Taking the above criteria into consideration, an appropriate film might be one such as "Baby Boom" starring Diane Keaton. The movie is 111 minutes long and can be broken down into ten different segments for study. It deals with a woman in top management and the sacrifices she must make to stay there versus conflicting sacrifices she must make to raise a child. Although the topic is serious it is light-hearted movie with a positive ending. The settings also include different aspects of American society from high power New York City business meetings to life in a rural Vermont town.

IV. Designing the course syllabus

There is a wide variety of teaching methods that can be used with movies. Again, which methods are selected depends on the students and the goals for the class, so it is important to keep these clearly in

mind. Before selecting specific teaching techniques it is important to decide how the instructor will use the movie(s) in class.

Generally speaking, there are two basic methods for using movies – showing the entire movie, or sticking to a specific topic or fragment of dialogues collected from several movies based on a “situational and functional syllabuses (Horibe, 1995).”

For our purposes, we have chosen to use a complete movie. Because of the level and goals of the students we decided to focus only on one or two themes from the movie. So instead of showing the movie in its entirety at first, we would show segments of the movie in each class. While the segments are in order, we would not necessarily show an entire segment each time and at times only the parts most relevant to the themes being followed would be shown. This is due to time constraints and the desire not to present too much material at one time. The class would focus on the main characters and plot and follow this throughout the semester. Students and instructor would view the movie together in its entirety at the end of the semester.

This method is chosen in order to maintain the students' interest and to heighten their motivation in the following class. Also, due to the rather low level of the class it was felt that classes should be kept as structurally consistent as possible in order to provide more security for the students in class.

Class format (See Appendix I and II)

A typical class consists of the following components: the pre-viewing activity, the main-viewing activity, the post-viewing activity, and an assignment.

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

1. Pre-viewing activity:

This is generally some type of warm-up activity. It is felt that the activity or activities chosen should not only relate to that day's movie sequence but should also help to generate interest and facilitate understanding of what the students will be seeing. These activities may take the form of vocabulary introduction, explanation of cultural background, review of what has happened so far in the movie, discussion of what may happen next, etc. This activity should take around 20 minutes.

2. Main-viewing activity

At this stage the students watch the day's selected sequence. The whole sequence and/or selected parts may be watched two or three more times. Between viewing there will be short discussions of the scene as well as comprehension questions. Focused questions are usually used before scenes are played or replayed and students are asked to look for something specific in the film. For example, what time of day is it? Does the main character eat or drink anything? If so, what? What does the secretary say to her boss? Are the people happy? The scene may be sometimes played with and sometimes without sound during some of the showings. At other times it may be played without the picture so the students will first listen and imagine before seeing the sequence. How the film shown will of course depend on the class objectives and level of students. The overall goal of the main viewing activity is general comprehension of the scene. This portion of the class would normally take around 20 to 30 minutes.

3. Post-viewing Activity

This phase will mostly consist of discussion. Discussion will take place in small groups or as a whole class. It was felt that discussions should move from what the students see in the film to how they feel about what they see. Statements of agreement or disagreement and debate may be used to stimulate the class. Discussions will be more directed at the beginning of the semester with the goal of training the students to more freely express their opinions and feelings by the end of the semester. This activity runs around 40 minutes each class.

4. Assignment

Assignments are used to continue interaction with the movie during the time between classes. It was intended that they be interesting for students and not too difficult to carry out. Assignments may include learning part of the script and role playing for the class, written assignments dealing with the main character or with how they would feel in the same situation, interviewing friends as to their opinions on a related topic and reporting to the class, and guessing what will happen in the next episode and reporting it to the class. This will take place in the last five minutes of class.

Semester overview

1. Class breakdown

The thirteen class sessions might be divided up as follows:

Session #1: introduction to movies, show opening scene of the movie

Sessions #2-11: each class focuses on one of the 10 segments

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

of the movie

Session #12: view entire movie together

Session #13: wrap-up discussion, reflection on the semester

2. Topical/cultural Focus: Women, can we have it all? Do we want it all? What does it mean to have it all? What is (the main character in this film) J.C. Wiatt's experience? What kind of person is she? Does she change throughout the movie? How? In what ways are you like J.C. Wiatt? In what ways are you different? What would J.C. Wiatt be like if she lived in Japan? Do you know someone like her? Describe J.C. Wiatt's relationship with other people. How do they change throughout the movie?

3. Linguistic focus: students will describe what they see and progress to what they think about what they see unfolding in the film, and personal applications will be made as appropriate. They will be asked the same or similar questions each week and attention will be paid to how the answers change. Time will be spent discussing the change and how the students feel about them.

VI. Conclusion

Carefully selected movies lend themselves well to cultivating communicative competence and promoting intercultural understanding in the foreign language classroom. Through movies students are able to develop clearer ideas of appropriateness and language use in real life by studying non-verbal aspects of communication as well as verbal ones. With these considerations in mind it seems quite clear that movies can be a beneficial as well as exciting classroom tool and that students and teachers can both profit from their use in language classrooms.

Appendix I

Specific Lesson Plan Example for the first class

Class 1 will screen the first 3 minutes 44 seconds of the film, the opening scene.

Focus of class: Introduction to the main character of the film as well as introduction to class format

1. Pre-viewing activity: (25 minutes)

Give an overview of purpose and goals of this semester.

Have students make data cards: name, address, travel experience, hobbies, family, life goal(s)/dream, and favorite American movie.

Brainstorm together in groups of three: American movies are..... Japanese movies are..... Students are to come up with as many descriptive words as possible. After about 10 minutes. Stop groups and solicit some answers to put on the board.

2. Main-viewing activity (35 minutes)

Concentrate on non-verbal aspects of the sequence. Explain that students will watch the first sequence twice without any sound. The first time they should just watch. The second time students can take notes. Write down all the descriptive words to describe whatever is seen in the movie. Students should remain in the same groups of three and pool their notes. Students then look at their words and try to answer the following questions.

1. Where does the movie take place?
2. Who is the main character? Describe clothes, personality, etc.
3. When does the movie take place?
4. What is the movie about?

Solicit answers from the students and put the main points on the board. Now show the movie with sound. Have students focus on the

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

same questions. Are there any new findings based on the things they hear? Discuss.

Hand out cloze test. Give students time to look it over and fill out anything they can. Show the movie again while they fill in the rest. This is to work on listening skills as well as to further introduce main character and set the tone for the movie.

Cloze Test (Words in parentheses blank on student papers.):

(Fifty-three) percent of the American work force is (female). Three generations of women that (turned) up a thousand years of tradition on its ear. As little (girls) they were told to grow up and (marry) doctors and lawyers. Instead, they grew up and (became) doctors and lawyers. They moved out of the "pink ghetto" and into the (executive) suite. Sociologists say the new (working) woman is a phenomenon of our time.

Take J.C. Wiatt for example. Graduated (first) in her class at Yale, got her MBA at Harvard, has a (corner) office at the (corner) of 58th and Park. She works five to nine. She makes (six) figures a year and they call her the "(Tiger) Lady". Married to her (job), she lives with an investment Banker married to (his). They collect African art, co-own their co-op and have separate but equal IRA accounts. One would take it for granted that a woman like this has it (all). One must never take anything for granted.

Note: more advanced classes could focus on the following questions. Does J.C. greet anyone in this scene? Who? What happens? What does this say about J.C.?

3. Post-viewing Activity (25 minutes)

In combined groups of six answer the following:

True or false:

1. The majority of women in American work.
2. Women were told to become doctors and lawyers when they were little girls.
3. The "Tiger Lady" refers to J.C. Wiatt.
4. The image of a "Tiger Lady" is a positive one.
5. J.C. Wiatt is happy.

Focus on Question #5. Have half the group complete the statement, I think J.C. Wiatt is happy because... while the other half completes, I think J.C. Wiatt is not happy because... Discuss as group. Next, have each person come up with one word to describe J.C., then have each group pick the best word and then pick the best word in the class. (Do this each week. Save your list of class words. Compare list each week.)

Reflection: as a whole group, any questions, thoughts on movie, etc. More advanced classes can discuss "What does it mean 'to have it all?'"

4. Assignment (5 minutes)

Ask five different types of people (older, younger, man, woman, white collar, blue collar, housewife, businesswoman, etc.) What do you think women want out of life? Be prepared to report on this in class as well as to turn in your questionnaire.

Appendix II

Specific Lesson Plan Example for the second class

Class 2--The first ten minutes of the movie

Focus of class: the scene of J.C. Wiatt and Fritz in the restaurant and specifically what J.C. wants out of life.

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

1. Pre-viewing activity: (20 minutes)

Go over assignment. Discuss as class, collect papers. What do students remember from previous week? Who is J.C. Wiatt? What is she like? Discuss briefly.

Go over following key words; get something off one's chest, sacrifice, personal life.

2. Main-viewing activity (30 minutes)

Questions to watch for: What do you learn about J.C. Wiatt? In the restaurant? At home? The students watch today's whole sequence once. Take notes. Again, write down all the descriptive words they can. Ask What does J.C. say about having it all? Show restaurant scene only.

Pass out following script and show again.

Scene.

INT. Restaurant – Day – J.C.' boss, Patrick "Fritz" Curtis, is having lunch with J.C. (Fritz has just offered J.C. a partnership in the company.)

Fritz: J.C., let me ask you something How many hours a week do you work now?

J.C.: I don't know. What, uh...seventy...eighty.

Fritz: Well, realize as a partner, the hours are only gonna get worse.

J.C.: I never complain about these things, Fritz.

Fritz: Yeah, I know that.

J.C.: You know me. I-I like work.

Fritz: Yeah, I know. I know. Okay. Just let me get this off my chest, okay?

J.C.: Sure.

Fritz: Now...

Fritz hears a noise and looks around the room.

Fritz: What's that knocking?

She stops shaking her leg.

Fritz: Well, never mind. Look, you know that normally I don't think of you as a woman. But, in this case, I do have to look at you as a woman slash partner. I mean, what if you and Steven decide to get married somewhere down the line? I mean, what if he expects a wife?

J.C.: Fritz, first of all...May I?

Fritz: Mmm.

J.C.: Steven and I are not getting married. And secondly, you know how we are, we both eat, sleep and dream our work. That's why we're together. Fritz, I understand what it takes to make it.

Fritz: But do you understand the sacrifices you're gonna have to make? I mean, a man can be a success and still have a personal life. A full personal life. My wife is there for me whenever I need her. I mean, she raises the kids, she decorates, she...(laughs)

Fritz realizes he doesn't know all the duties of a housewife.

J.C.: (laughs)

Fritz: I don't know what the hell she does, but she takes care of things. I guess...what I'm saying is I'm lucky. I can have it all.

J.C.: Is that what you're worried about? Forget it. I don't want it all. I don't.

3. Post-viewing Activity (35 minutes)

What does J.C. say about wanting it all?

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

A. She feels she has it all. B. She doesn't want it all. C. She wants it all.

What is Fritz worried about?

A. He feels that J.C. works too hard. B. He thinks of her as a man.
C. He's worried that she wants a personal life.

What kind of relationship do J.C. and Steven have?

A. Convenient B. Callous C. Caring

Answer the questions and add two statements. For example,

How does J.C. react to Fritz' proposal of partnership?

A. Calmly B. Nervously C. Hysterically

Answer: B. She reacts nervously. She tries to act calm, but her legs shake. She is also surprised at the news.

Have each person come up with one word to describe J.C. based on this week's scene, then have each group pick the best word and then pick the best word in the class.

Compare with last week's word.

More advanced discussion questions

What does J.C. sacrifice to get where she is in her company?

Does Fritz make the same sacrifices? Why? Why not?

At the end of the scene there is a phone call and J.C. finds out she will receive something from a relative who died. What do you think she will receive? Brainstorm in small groups.

4. Assignment (5 minutes)

1. Ask your father or some other businessman how they would feel working with a woman executive?
2. How would you feel about becoming a woman executive in Japan?

Notes

- 1 Morain, G. G. 1986. *Kinesics and cross-cultural understanding*. In *Culture Bound*. Valdes, J. M. (ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 65.
- 2 Stempleski, S. and Tomalin, B. 1990. *Video in Action*. UK: Prentice Hall International English Language Teaching. p. 4.

References

- Brown, H. D. 1986. *Learning a second culture*. In *Culture Bound*. Valdes, J. M. (ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 45.
- Cooper, R., Lavey, M. and Rinvolutri, M. 1991. *Video*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. p. 3.
- FOUR-IN Creative Products. 1993. *Screenplay Baby Boom*. Nagoya: Screenplay shuppan kabushiki-kaisha. pp. 7~8. pp. 11~13.
- Horibe, H. 1995. *Effective Use of Movie Fragments for Syllabus Units*. In *Teaching English Through Movies*. Nagoya: Kouhansha. p. 68.
- Koike, I. (ed.). 1985. *General Survey of English Language Teaching at Colleges and Universities in Japan – Students' View –*. Tokyo: Daigaku Eigo Kyoiku Gakkai. pp. 93~94.
- Mombusho. 1989. *Kotogakko Gakushu-yoryo Kaisetsu Gaikokugo-hen Eigo-hen*. Tokyo: Kyoiku Shuppan Kabushiki-gaisha
- Morain, G. G. 1986. *Kinesics and cross-cultural understanding*. In *Culture Bound*. Valdes, J. M. (ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 65.

A Study of Teaching English through Movies

- Lonergan, J. 1984. *Video in Language teaching*. UK: Cambridge Language Teaching Library. p. 4~5.
- Stempleski, S. and Tomalin, B. 1990. *Video in Action*. UK: Prentice Hall International English Language Teaching. p. 3~4.
- Tsukagoshi, H. 1995. *Needs Analysis and the Teaching of English through Movies*. In *Teaching English Through Movies*. Nagoya: Kouhansha. p. 60.
- Valdes, J. M. 1986. *Language, thought, and culture*. In *Culture Bound*. Valdes, J. M. (ed.) New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 2.