

Using Film in Low Level Non-major Oral Communication Courses

初級英語オーラル・コミュニケーションの授業における
映像教材の使用について

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to suggest an alternative to textbook based activities for general education English courses offered at universities in Japan. In this article, I will especially be concerned with classes designed for students who are majoring in fields which do not have a clear connection to the use of English, for instance pre-school education, social welfare, physical education and nutrition to name a few. In other words, this article is written for the benefit of instructors who have students majoring in subjects that offer little stimulus to their students motivating them to master or even use a foreign language.

要約

本稿では、幼児教育、体育、栄養学、福祉などの学部生のために英語の授業の新しい教育方法を提案する。これらのような学習者の中で、学部専攻との明確な繋がりが無いという理由もあり、英語学習意欲が未熟で、英語の学力も初歩的というケースは少なくない。よってこのような一般教育の授業で、英語に興味を持たせることや、学習する動機をつけることが重要である。その動機付けのために、従来の教材に代わって、映画やビデオを用いるという教育方法を紹介する。学生に日本語字幕付きのビデオを見せ、その内容について英語で問題を解かせることや、内容について会話をさせることが目的である。すなわち、従来は、レベルの高い学生にしか用いられないハリウッド映画を低いレベルの学生の授業で用いるという新しい学習方法である。また、本稿でこの教育方法で学んだ学習者のアンケートの結果を示し、教育理論という観点からも考察し、映画の学習方法が有効であるということを論じる。

Introduction

In this article I outline a process for using film to improve students' grammatical knowledge and communication ability. The writer of this article makes the assumption that the students in these courses can be characterized as having a small English vocabulary, and little grasp of the grammatical structure of English or unable to apply what knowledge they do have to spoken expressions. It seems that the biggest battle in many of these classes is improving student motivation to learn. Motivation is often directly related to interest in the topic as noted by Dörnyei (2001).

From the outset, this activity was designed to improve student interest in English while working as a springboard for language production. It was necessary to discover what kind of activities the students would find of interest. Therefore, on the first day of the semester, I had students fill out a questionnaire in four freshman and sophomore non-English major courses. The first question asked what their goals were in the "course" The following 6 choices were offered.

- 1 I only want credit for the course.
- 2 I would like to learn basic English for travel
- 3 I would like to read books in English
- 4 I would like to master speaking and conversation.
- 5 I would like to be able to watch movies in English.
- 6 I would like to have a job in a foreign country.

In this anonymous survey, the most common answers were 2, 4 and 5. In the free comment section, the two requests most often made were, that the teacher concentrate on *spoken* English and that the class be *fun*. From this, it can be inferred that the students described above, are in fact interested in learning English, despite the fact that it is generally unnecessary for the majors in which they study. Moreover, the fact that the majority of students hope to obtain spoken English skill, or oral fluency is an important recourse.

Using film in non-major oral English classes

Considering the two goals of concentrating on spoken English, while making the class enjoyable, I would like to discuss material I have developed for my non-major oral-

English classes. There are a number of reasons why authentic video is a medium that will draw student interest, and lead to deeper motivation. Firstly, Hollywood movies enjoy constant popularity in Japan. When asked to name a famous foreigner, many Japanese young people will first think of American, British or Australian movie actors. Movies are a constant request in student feedback forms. Watching films is one of the few ways that Japanese youth come into contact with English language cultural texts.

However authentic video poses some serious problems. The most obvious hurdle is that the English level (vocabulary and grammar) is far above the level that the students can understand. Moreover the speaking speed is so high that even if the students knew every grammar point and all of the vocabulary words in a particular scene, they would still be unable to comprehend very little. Therefore, introducing video into first year classes takes a little creativity, and in order to do so, many presumptions about authentic video need to be put aside. Primarily the view that the movie will be a model of real English is inappropriate for this kind of authentic video usage. For the most part students will get very little listening practice from a video (though it should be noted that some students in this study were able to pick up shorter phrases and repeat them in a kind of spontaneous autonomous learning). Rather, the purpose should be seen as an opportunity to co-opt student interest in movies to boost interest in learning and in turn improve motivation. At the same time viewing of a video gives the students a shared experience from which to base communicative exercises upon.

Methodology

The movie used for this research was “Notting Hill” (1999) starring Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts. In this film, Anna Scott (Roberts) is a famous Hollywood star, who has come to London to promote her latest film. William (Grant) is a mild-mannered Englishman who runs a bookstore specializing in travel books. One day Anna visits the bookstore and the two meet. Their romance goes through a number of ups and downs, before the movie ends in an exciting climax.

Before we watch excerpts from the movie, I have the students write down anything about their favorite movies and introduce that information verbally to their partner in class. Next we watch the first 12 minutes of the movie, broken into three segments of

about 4 minutes each. After the first segment is finished I stop the video and ask the students to think about what has happened. Next we do exercise 1.

Exercise 1

Part I: What happened in the scene you saw?

1. walk down the street → *William walked down the street.*
2. see many people
3. go into his house
4. talk to spike
5. ask for advice about his shirt
6. give advice about
7. go

This first exercise is quite simple, as the students need only to supply the subject and change the verb to the past tense. However considering the level, and the fact that many students have never done anything like this kind of study, this worksheet actually took much more time than expected.

At this point students learn that the goal of the lesson is to explain a chain of events to someone in English. I tell the students that this could be useful to explain how your bags were stolen in a foreign country, or to explain about some other experience. We then watch the next scene and students this time get a word scramble they must solve.

Exercise 2:

1. Talk to / William/ the business situation / about / his employee
2. Go / cappuccino/ William's employee / to buy
3. Come into the shop / a book/ Anna Scott, the famous actress / to look for
4. Talk to / William / Anna / about / a book/ about Turkey
5. Catch / a book / a thief who stole/ William / about Bali
6. buy / Anna / a book

Once the students have put the words into the right order and checked the verb tense, we do a chorus practice. Then, I ask them to tell their partners what has happened so far in the story, using the example sentences as hints. Both partners tell the whole story. Next students switch partners, and tell the story again, but the second time they are told not to look at their papers.

Next we watch the final 4 minutes of the video and again fill in the paper.

Exercise 3

1. Spill / William / Orange juice / Anna's shirt
2. Invite / Anna / William / at his house / to clean up
3. Clean up / ????? / the house
4. Changed / ???? / her clothes
5. Offered / ????? / some tea and food / to ?????
6. Say / ???? / "no thank you"
7. Leave / ?????
8. Come back / ???? / she forgot her bag / because
9. Kiss/ ???? / William

Once answers are checked, I introduce "time markers", function words that indicate temporal relationships between ideas (First, next, and then, after that, finally). The students start at the beginning of the story and explain what happened in the first 15 minutes using the past tense and time markers. Students work in pairs, one pair tells the first half and the second pair tells the second half. Next they switch and the second pair tells the first half and so on. The key point is that they tell the story from memory, making use of the past tense.

Finally students are asked to tell about their weekend using the same past tense and time markers. For homework, they are to choose one of the characters and write that person's diary, as if they were William or Anna. This time they are instructed to elaborate, adding more actions than those covered on the worksheet. In addition they are to include expressions of feelings that the character had, bringing in a facet of creative writing.

Authentic video in the EFL classroom

There are a number of books concerning authentic film in EFL courses. Cooper (1991), Stempeski (1990), Allan M. (1986) are excellent resources. Although, few of these concern themselves with elementary level students as the present study does, most do offer excellent activities to spawn interesting conversations. Many of these activities can form the basis for self-motivated second language acquisition as students start asking themselves, “how do I say that in English”. This becomes the impetus for student motivated learning. According to these books, the benefits of video are almost innumerable, but include:

- The teacher can take advantage of the aura surrounding Hollywood movies.
- Sight and sound stimulates the student’s minds, possibly leading to greater retention.
- Signifiers and signified are connected to visual referents on the screen.
- There are many chances to talk about implied aspects of the video
(ex. “How do you think he felt when …?”)

However, most of the activities outlined in the books above are aimed at higher intermediate to advanced students. There are very few authentic video activities that target the kind of false beginners that come to English courses as first year students.

Justification:

The fact that the subjects of this study were non-majors with low skills, weak confidence and motivation problems is not inadvertent. These three facts actually prompted the use of video. Firstly I had found that students were not retaining the grammar in the textbooks, despite belabored attempts to teach it. Secondly the textbooks lacked any way to give the students a feeling of accomplishment, they were full of exercises, secondary grammar points, and more vocabulary words than could be covered in 90 minutes. The textbook seemed to be telling the students “look at all of this English that you can’t and never will understand.” Finally it seemed that many of the tasks that the textbooks had little relation to activities students might carry out in Japan or abroad (ie. renting an apartment; signing up for classes at university). These three serious problems led to the current research. The video lesson described above has

the following advantages over the textbook.

- It educates the students on one key grammar point, the past tense.
- It educates them on one key function, time markers
- It provides the students with a necessary skill, to relate a chain of events orally to a listener.
- It allows for creative elaboration when students apply the language learned during the video to their own lives. (ie. what they did last weekend.)
- It teaches the students key vocabulary words (catch, buy, clean up, leave, and their past tenses) with a solid context (the scenes in the film.)
- It gives students a sense of accomplishment when they are able to retell the whole story, without looking at their notes or the worksheet. Furthermore, when they use the same past tense and time markers to retell their personal experiences, they are able to feel a further sense that they really have improved.

Moreover, instructors can introduce any target vocabulary or grammar, by choosing from the endless list of films available. Any target structure, function or vocabulary can be taught. In addition I noticed the method gave students a great deal of collateral education in the process. Students watching movies experience a great deal of cultural information. Although Japanese students watch English language movies all the time, they may be more inclined to think about culture and cultural difference when watching a film in an English class. Furthermore, they have a native or relative expert of that culture available to explain any questions that they have. Finally, I have heard even the lowest level of students repeating short phrases that they heard in the video, without any prompting from the teacher.

Student Motivation

If there is one factor that needs to be addressed in English communication courses for students who are majoring in fields that do not require or reward English ability, it is student motivation. Students in this study are majoring in fields such as pre-school education, social welfare, physical education and nutrition. These fields neither require proficiency in English nor reward it. Therefore there is little outside motivation. The motivation to study must come from the teacher or the students

themselves. If this motivation is only related to getting a passing grade in the course, the students may work hard for the duration of the semester, but the teacher has done nothing to foster an actual interest in English. He or she has merely prolonged the student's interaction with the language to the end of the semester and increased the likelihood that the students will never again attempt to learn a foreign language after that.

The key to motivation then is to present the language as something that relates to the student's own character, try to improve confidence by helping students to use English in a limited number of real world tasks and attempt to foster a genuine interest that may motivate them to make English a lifelong interest. In order to measure the degree to which video can help I conducted an anonymous survey with the following questions.

Questionnaire:

- | | |
|---------------|------------------------------------|
| 思わない = 1 | (I don't think so) |
| やや思わない = 2 | (I don't think so to some degree.) |
| どちらとも言えない = 3 | (I can't say either way.) |
| やや思う = 4 | (Yes to some degree.) |
| 強く思う = 5 | (Yes, I think so) |

1. Was this lesson interesting?
2. Did this lesson help you learn or practice the past tense?
3. Would you like to use movies in your lessons in the future?
4. Did you have a chance to practice speaking today?
5. Do you think this kind of lesson will make you more interested in studying English?

In addition to a number score, students were asked to write some comments in Japanese or English. The results of this survey were as follows.

Number of returned surveys: 23

1. Was this lesson interesting? (1=I don't think so; 5=yes, very much)

1	0	
2	0	
3	4	Average score = 4.26
4	9	
5	10	

2. Did this lesson help you learn or practice the past tense?

1	0	
2	2	
3	6	Average score = 3.77
4	9	
5	5	(one questionnaire had no response for this question)

3. Would you like to use movies in your lessons in the future?

1	0	
2	0	
3	3	Average score = 4.26
4	11	
5	9	

4. Did you have a chance to practice speaking today?

1	1	
2	3	
3	8	Average score = 3.34
4	9	
5	2	

Through these responses, it can be seen that students enjoyed the activity. Moreover, most of the students felt that their skill in using the past tense had improved. Finally, the use of video facilitated oral communication practice. In this way, student interest in English was heightened, while at the same time they were able

to learn and practice two important target forms, past tense and time markers.

Conclusion

Beyond the focus of form shown in the example above, authentic video gives students a shared experience, from which they can draw upon to produce language. The actions witnessed on the screen can be the object of discussion and writing assignments that have proven to be more inspiring and interesting than those appearing in most textbooks. Moreover, it is possible to find video material to facilitate practice of almost any target form, function or communicative task. In other words any target structure found in general English language textbooks can be taught using the process outlined in this article. This kind of learning requires creation of worksheets and research to find appropriate scenes for class use. However, the popularity of these activities and the visible change in attitudes towards English showed by the students rewards the effort. Students who are more motivated try harder in class, and learn more, making the experience more profitable for both student as well as teacher.

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