

## Using Movies to Teach English, Culture and Socio-Politics

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### Movies are a Great Resource

If integrated into the classroom effectively, films represent a highly engaging and motivating pedagogic resource, with an abundance of teaching and learning opportunities. Movies can be a valuable source of supplementary listening material or can constitute the core component of a language course (Sommer, 2001). Either way, movies provide realistic models of spoken interaction for students, exposing them to semi-authentic social settings and the chance to examine communication between native speakers in the cultural environment of the target language (Stempleski, 1992; Telatnik and Kruse, 1982).

If films are chosen with the background and interests of students in mind, learners can relate the situations and exchanges in movies to their own lives. This can be highly motivating (Mirvan, 2013, Kusumarasdyati, 2004; Lonergan, 1984). It is often preferable to include movies from a range of genres, contexts and cultures.

Four movies which I have found to work particularly well with my university students are *Leon the Professional* (Besson, 1994), *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999), *Notting Hill* (Michell, 1999), and *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1984). This article offers practical advice for teachers on how to use movies to teach English, promote cross-cultural understanding, and explore socio-political issues. The examples which follow are taken from the four films mentioned above. However, the methodology and approach described here is applicable to most movies.

### Linguistic Themes

Movies can be used to develop language skills. Research suggests that using movies is a great way to develop listening skills (Egan, 2003). One important advantage in this respect is that movies provide context cues such as body language and facial expressions, which can do a lot to assist students' comprehension (Allan, 1985). Having students speculate with a partner about what will happen next is one way to practice speaking and fluency.

There are also many opportunities for students to practice reading and writing skills. For instance, after watching a movie, you could ask students to choose one of the characters and write a letter to him or her. Reading exercises can also be employed by having students read and answer comprehension questions

on a movie synopsis. These are just some of the many ways in which movies can be employed to build language skills.

Movies can also assist in the acquisition of new vocabulary. Each film has its own lexical set, which can be the focus of learning activities. In some cases, it might be desirable to pre-teach vocabulary in order to facilitate student understanding of a movie. Alternatively, a teacher may wish to examine particular words of interest after watching a film in class, thereby giving students the chance to learn new vocabulary and understand the storyline more deeply.

Finally, movies can be used as a starting point for the study of grammar. By closely examining a movie script, students' attention can be drawn to various structural aspects of language. Given that movies are such a rich linguistic resource, and because they are intrinsically motivating for students, they offer excellent language-learning potential. As well as language learning, movies open up a number of additional learning opportunities.

### Extra-linguistic Themes

Movies can be employed in order to explore cultural, historical and political issues. Feature films all come with a specific context, which can be readily exploited for this purpose. For example, the customs depicted in movies are often culturally specific to the setting of the film. These can be highlighted and contrasted with corresponding customs in the students' own culture. Most movies are full of references to fashion and music, attitudes and values, and the political climate which can be used as a contextual springboard for a more in depth exploration using presentations and project work. Using movies offers the opportunity to broaden students' understanding of a variety of useful and relevant topics.

### Intensive Viewing

Movies can be viewed either intensively or extensively. Both approaches have their merits and it is helpful to combine the two. Intensive viewing uses short instalments from a movie, each around 10 minutes in length without subtitles. The language from each instalment is scrutinised closely during pre- and post-viewing activities.

*English Grammar in Focus* (Hamada & Akimoto, 2010) is an EFL textbook published by Macmillan

Education. This book works very well for intensive movie-viewing. It is based on the movie *Notting Hill*, a romantic British comedy starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant. The text is divided into 12 units, each focusing on a short instalment of the movie. The units progress helpfully from vocabulary and context-setting to viewing and comprehension. Exercises then focus on listening for details and expressions, then on functional grammar based on examples lifted from the movie clip. Units usually finish with more expansive, freer activities, often relating to society and culture.

### Extensive Viewing

In contrast to intensive viewing, extensive viewing involves watching a whole movie in one or two instalments with subtitles in English. Activities tend to focus on more global understanding and skills fluency. In my experience, a block of four 90-minute classes works well for one movie. The first class consists of previewing and the fourth, post-viewing activities. Classes two and three are for the first and second instalments of the movie. Previewing activities typically include vocabulary-building, prediction, and establishing context. Post-viewing activities usually include critical discussion, acting in character or role-playing. After each film, a written movie report is assigned as homework.

The movie report is an excellent consolidation activity. The following format works well: The report should be around 400-words and three-paragraphs long. The first paragraph is a summary of the movie plot. The second paragraph is an analysis of a character of the student's choosing. In the final paragraph, students are required to relate the movie to their own life experience or existing knowledge in some way. The progression of these three paragraphs from a scaffolded reporting of details, to a more inferential and personalised orientation helps students to explore issues more critically and from a variety of angles.

### Vocabulary Activities

*Quizlet* is a free Web 2.0 application which enables users to create and study with digital flashcards. Users need minimal knowledge of computer technology to interact, share flashcards and study vocabulary on the *Quizlet* site (Forster, 2011). Before watching *The Matrix*, students studied specialised Information Technology-related words (e.g. *cybercrime*) using their smart phone and the *Quizlet digital* flashcards app. The app allows teachers to distribute digital flashcards to

students instantaneously via the Web. A set of flashcards for wedding vocabulary for the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral* can be found at <http://quizlet.com/gtult>. You can also use the Quizlet website to generate paper tests to assess students' progress with the vocabulary sets.

### Context Activities

Setting a firm context for a film before watching can greatly assist students' comprehension when they watch a movie in a foreign language. It also represents an opportunity to explore some of the cross-cultural, sociological and historical aspects of a movie in greater depth.

For example, prior to watching *Back to the Future*, I asked my students to research life in the USA in 1955 and in 1985 in terms of social norms, technology, politics, and popular culture. Pairs of students presented their findings to the rest of the class. As well as being an engaging way for students to practice their language skills, these presentations increased the students' knowledge about the United States, and how it has changed. In doing so, they were much better able to understand the movie when it came to watching.

In a second example, prior to viewing *The Matrix*, I encouraged my class to consider the life of our distant ancestors. I showed four images of life during the Palaeolithic era (relating to *work, communication, transport* and *home*) and asked small groups to come up with a category name for each picture. Next, images for the same four categories were shown, but this time depicting life during the Roman Empire. Students decided on a rough date for the scenes (i.e. about 2000 years ago). The process was repeated, with images from 100 years ago and from the present.

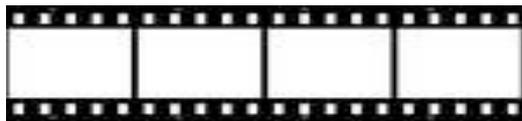
By this stage, most students were conscious of the sense of progress associated with the successive sets of images. Small groups were then handed an A3 sheet of paper divided into four quadrants, each representing one of the four categories referred to above. Students attempted to imagine life 100 years into the future in terms of the four categories. Groups represented their ideas in pictures, and finally presented to the rest of the class. This activity encourages critical and imaginative thinking, team working, and discussion. In the process, learners practice their listening, speaking and presenting skills. It also served to activate and build upon the students' knowledge and understanding of technological development. As with the previous example, this activity also served to make students more

receptive to the context and story of the movie which they were about to watch.

### Follow-Up Projects

Having watched a movie in class, the shared experience and context which the film provides can be used as a foundation for project work, such as an essay, a blog or a presentation. For example, *Leon the Professional* is set in New York. I had my students choose a place in the city that they would like to visit. They were then required to write a blog post introducing their chosen location on the class website. Students read each other's blogs and had to make short comments in response.

*Notting Hill*'s two main characters are *Anna Scott*, a famous American actress, and *William Thacker*, a British bookstore owner. After the movie, we examined examples of differences between US and UK English taken from the script. Groups of three students were then asked to find five examples of their own and write an amusing dialogue between an American and a Brit, involving miscommunication of some or all of the five terms. The groups then used their smartphones to video the scene and then post it to the class *YouTube* page for viewing and comments by other class members.



### Conclusion

In conclusion, when exploited effectively, and in combination with a variety of new technologies, movies can be a stimulating teaching resource. In addition to providing students with valuable models of spoken discourse in a rich contextual setting, films represent a mine of socio-cultural, historical and political information which can be used as the basis for language study, vocabulary development and skills practice.

Rather than simply being an easy option for a class at the end of term, movies can form the central focus of a course to develop students' language proficiency, interpersonal skills, team work abilities and critical thinking, while simultaneously increasing their knowledge and understanding of important historical, socio-cultural, and political issues.

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