Using Feature Films for Theme-based Instruction to EFL College Students

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Abstract

Using feature films increases EFL students’ motivation because they bring into classroom the two key elements of young people’s life today--entertainment and multimedia. This study investigates the attitude and perception of ten college students who volunteer to attend a four-session activity by watching English movies at National Kaohsiung University of Applied Sciences. They answered a questionnaire before and after the sessions and turned in a written report in English at the end of the activity. The quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to show the students’ expectation and perceived gains of watching films in the areas of English learning, critical thinking skills and aesthetic experience. The purpose of the study was to realize how EFL students respond to theme-based instruction with feature films. The results showed that what the students expected to learn the most is cultural knowledge. They also harbored high expectation to improve language and thinking skills by watching English films. After the sessions, they reported greatest gains in learning about other cultures and understanding the symbolic meanings of the film, followed by learning vocabulary and phrases and comparing different viewpoints. The students also demonstrated critical thinking by establishing their personal viewpoints in their written reports but in a limited fashion.

Due to the limited number of subjects, the results of this study will be further verified by another investigation to be conducted in the near future. Nevertheless, the study at least...
suggested that using the whole film in the language classroom is feasible. If the teacher adopts theme-based instruction, students will reap benefits not only on language learning but also on critical thinking skills.

Key words: feature films, theme-based instruction, whole-film approach, critical thinking skill

I. Introduction

With the rapid progress of technology for the past few decades, the way of teaching and learning English is changing dramatically. When the younger generations is getting accustomed to a life shaped by multimedia—the Internet, cell phone, digital cameras, games—learning that is confined to the printed form has lost its appeal. To sustain student’s motivation of learning a language, therefore, teachers and educators have taken the challenge of incorporating the features of multimedia into their instruction. The use of video, in the form of VCR or DVD, is a good example. Other than adapting to the learning style of younger generation, another reason for teachers to use video in language classroom is the call for using authentic materials for language teaching. Like printed materials, some videos are made for language learning purpose while others are taken from the culture of the target language directly. Since 1986, there has been a trend of using authentic materials in language classroom (Stempski 1992). Using the cultural products of the target language becomes a sensible choice. Moreover, thanks to the Internet, teachers have more access to diverse video materials, including TV commercials, documentaries, movies. This further facilitates the use of video for teaching purpose.

All teachers must have had the experience of using video in the classroom. But, most use the instructional version or the shorter form of the authentic version for supplementary purpose. The idea of making movies, or feature films, the center of a language class seems rather daunting. In fact, using feature films for language instruction did not receive much attention in the early 1990s in the field of TESOL (Wood, 1995). The major concerns were who should choose the film considering the taste gap between teachers and students; how long should it be played; and how to deal with the pervasive non-standard language in the film (Wood, 1995). The scenes with hot topics such as sex, violence, or profanity are also a problem (Gareis, 1997).

Despite the foregoing problems, some researchers still call for the use of films in language class. Among the various cultural products, feature films are most attractive to
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students because of their entertainment and artistic effects. As King pointed out, “feature films are more intrinsically motivating than videos made for EFL-ESL teaching because they provide students with a film to be enjoyed rather than a lesson that needs to be tested on” (2002). Moreover, films present English in real life context and authentic cross-cultural information. “The immense potential range of subject, language, communicative situation, imagination and culture that movies offer cannot be matched by any other raw communicative materials, at least in the EFL context of Asia” (Wood, 1995, p. 9).

Another factor that justifies the use of film in the class is the advance of technology. With the invention of DVD (digital video disc) in the 1990s, teachers have been greatly empowered (Lin, 2000). The DVD disc allows a far larger capacity than VHS cassette does and contains not only the audio-visual features of a film but also subtitles of various languages. Most importantly, the DVD players have functions that enable the teacher to easily control the presentation of the film. The functions highly facilitate the designing of classroom activities (Stempleski & Tomalin, 2001; Lin, 2001; Kechen, 2003).

The idea of using feature films in language classroom has appealed to some teachers, but they use it for different purposes. Some play a film to improve students’ language skills, primarily listening. Others lead students to explore the content of the film to acquire knowledge and non-language as well as language skills. By drawing attention to the content, the second approach seems to utilize the film more thoroughly than the first one. After all, the value of feature films lies in its rich content. For this reason, this study focuses on the second approach. It involved a couple of volunteer students in a short-term learning-through-film activity. The purpose is to examine the value of using feature films for content-based instruction. What benefits can students reap from it? How do they look at such way of learning? It is hoped that the results will provide an empirical basis for the development of a regular course.

II. Literature Review

Theme-based Language Instruction

Theme-based instruction is a variation of content-based instruction (CBI). According to Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003), CBI program can be implemented in different models:

1. Sheltered content instruction: the use of special teaching techniques to make academic content accessible to students with limited target language proficiency.
2. Adjunct course model: the coupling of a content course taught by a teacher in a specific discipline and a specially designed language course taught by a language
instructor.

3. Theme based course: self-contained course taught by language instructors that incorporate target language usage from one or more disciplines.

The theme-based language instruction, the most-widespread CBI, is the theoretical basis for designing and executing the four film-viewing and discussing sessions. The main purpose of the theme-based instruction is to allow students to develop language skills within specific topic areas. Therefore, learners can learn the knowledge of the specific content area and increase their language skills naturally.

In general language class, content offers little continuity across different language skills. However, the theme-based approach not only can be used to improve single language skill but also to integrate different language skills for more comprehensive language learning. In addition to developing language skills, another advantage of theme-based model is to allow learners to engage in higher-level language processing and thinking skills by using authentic teaching materials and tasks. The authentic materials and tasks are considered motivating for learners. They help learners reprocess words and forms and stimulate them to construct their knowledge by creating meaning from their prior knowledge (Allen, 2004; Pally, 2000). This kind of higher-order thinking allows learners to gain true language proficiency (Kabilan, 2000) and to relate learners’ past experiences with their new knowledge (Dantas-Whitney, 2002).

Using DVD Feature Films as the Content for EFL students

Researchers generally agree that using feature films in language class is favorable. But, they have different opinions on the purpose and the approach in the classroom. As the literature showed, most of them found it useful as a medium to enhance language skills—listening, speaking, and reading. Ktechen, (2003) asserted that it is feasible to teach listening and speaking to Taiwan college students with a course based on DVD films. Lin (2002) found that a DVD Chinese film can effectively boost learner-centered language learning. Holden (2002) also supported the idea of using films to motivate students to improve both their listening and communication skills. According to Luo (2003), DVD films can help enhance college freshmen’s English listening comprehension and motivation. Evans (2007) contended that films are useful tools to teach metacognitive reading strategy, motivating students to read difficult text, encouraging textual engagement, and improving comprehension.

Given that feature films provide authentic materials and raise student’s learning motivation, it is a valuable resource for teaching language skills. But, some researchers think that feature films can serve more functions than that. They call for the use of the
Using Feature Films for Theme-based Instruction to EFL College Students

content of the film for other instruction purposes. Their proposals embodied the two models identified by Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003): the theme-based course and the sheltered content instruction. Some researchers use film to provide specific themes for students to learn academic as well as language skills. For example, Furmanovskyy (1996) suggested using movie as well as other authentic video materials to prepare Japanese students for EAP classes. Pally (1998) also provided a rationale for using sustained content study of films to develop ESL students’ literacy, including reading and writing skills. As King (2002) pointed out, a theme-based discussion allows students to explore relevant issues raised from a variety of perspectives, develop critical thinking skills, solicit responses, converse freely on many of the aspects of films they have viewed. Compared with the approach to merely improve language skills, the theme-based approach utilizes the feature of film more thoroughly by integrating content with EFL/ESL instruction.

The other model, the shared content instruction, aims at teaching the knowledge of other academic fields, for example, cinematography or literature. The researchers believe that, drawing students’ attention to these fields will bring students closer not only to the second/foreign language but also to its culture and society. Carr (1987) suggested that teachers make students heed not only the linguistic features such as vocabulary and dialogue but also cinematographic topics such as directing style or the film genre’s conventions. Sommer (2001) also pointed out that by using discussion and group activities in language classroom, students can analyze the film to achieve contextual understandings that are literary, historical, social, and cultural. They also learned about the art of movie-making. The study of Chapple & Curtis (2000) contended that feature films help develop students’ language skills, critical thinking skills and content/technical film knowledge. Other than cinematography, some researchers regards film an ideal tool for teaching literature (Jolly, 1998; Gareis, 1997; 2001; Bo, 2008).

When an instructor considers the purpose of using films in the classroom—language skills, thinking skills, and content knowledge--, the students’ English proficiency level is another factor to be taken into account. For entertainment purpose, all students welcome the use of films. But, for the purpose of learning, the instructor must ponder how to bring the effect of films into full play without overloading the students. For students of lower English proficiency, films can be used to train language skills, but as Holden (2002) cautioned, authentic video material can supplement but not entirely replace traditional approaches to the teaching of listening, particularly for beginners.

Content-based instruction, either theme-based or shared instruction, makes a more thorough use of feature films. Taking this approach, however, requires the instructor to consider the English proficiency level of the students. In other words, the learners must
determine the effects of feature films on EFL students’ language learning and development of critical thinking is needed. For future research, pre and post-test experiments are recommended to determine the effect of film viewing on students’ language learning. The duration of the research was four weeks, which may not be able to gain in-depth information of the effect of film viewing. Extending the length of research time to regular semester may allow instructors to apply different instructional and research designs to gain more insights.

References


Appendix A

A Questionnaire on English Learning through Films

November, 2008

I.

1. Gender: 1. □ male 2. □ female


3. Grade: 1. □ freshman 2. □ sophomore 3. □ junior 4. □ senior

II.

4. Why did you attend this activity?
   1. □ I like to watch movie 2. □ I want to learn English
   3. □ other ______________

5. What do you expect from attending this activity?

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<td>(2) to improve speaking</td>
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<td>(3) to build up vocabulary and phrases</td>
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<td>(4) to learn about other cultures</td>
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<td>(7) to learn to compare different viewpoints</td>
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<td>(9) to increase the knowledge of film</td>
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<td>(10) to understand the symbolic meaning of a film</td>
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<td>(11) to respond to aesthetic objects</td>
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III.


6. This activity fulfilled my expectations

7. What benefits did you get from this activity?
   (1) improving listening
   (2) improving speaking
   (3) learning more vocabulary and phrases
   (4) learning more about other cultures
   (5) learning to analyze a problem
   (6) learning to analyze cultural differences
   (7) learning to compare different viewpoints
   (8) learning to form personal viewpoints
   (9) learning more knowledge of film
   (10) understanding the symbolic meaning of films
   (11) learning to respond to aesthetic objects

8. I become more interested in learning English

9. I’m willing to attend similar activities in the future

IV.

11. My favorite types of movie are
   1. sci-fiction  2. history  3. life story
   4. action movie  5. love story  6. other

12. My favorite activities in the classroom are
   1. group discussion  2. writing opinions  3. role play
   4. oral report  5. other

13. My comments for the four learning sessions
以電影對大專英語學習學生進行主題式教學之研究

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摘 要

使用電影教學可提升學生學習動機，因爲電影將現代年輕人生活中兩大要素帶入課堂中——娛樂性和多媒體。本研究調查十名自願參加英語電影讀書會的學生，透過問卷和心得報告，探究其參加四場電影觀賞討論前之期望，以及參加後之態度及自覺之收穫。研究目的在於了解學生對以電影做主題式教學之反應。結果顯示，學生最希望學習到的是建立個人觀點，也盼望提升語言能力和批判性思考的能力。後測結果發現，學生認為學到最多的是文化知識，以及該影片的象徵涵意，在語言能力方面，也表示學到很多實用的辭彙，以及能夠比較不同的觀點。心得報告方面，學生確有形成個人觀點，呈現出部分批判性思考，但是內容較不完整與深入。

由於本研究樣本數量有限，研究結果尚待近期另一項研究進一步證實。然而此次初步的調查研究，至少顯示使用整部電影進行主題式教學的可行性及好處，學生不僅學習語言，更可精進批判性思考的能力。

關鍵字：電影、主題式教學、全片放映教學法、批判性思考