Using Films in the ESL Classroom to Improve Communication Skills of Non-Native Learners

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Abstract: With the ever-increasing developments in audiovisual technologies, their uses are not limited to entertaining people anymore. In fact, audiovisual technologies could be incorporated in the classroom for second language acquisition. In line with that view, this article highlights the effectiveness of exposure to films on improving the speaking skills of non-native English language learners. The article implied that audiovisual technologies, such as films, generally are a great source for teaching spoken English and must be used more in non-native English language learning contexts.

Index Terms: ESL, communicative English, audiovisual technology, films

INTRODUCTION

One of the problems that non-native English language learners face is the lack of interaction in the language at home, school, or neighbourhood; which is generally understood to boost language learning through providing the necessary language input for spoken language learning (Bahrani & Tam, 2011; Bahrani & Tam, 2012; Li, 2009). In some cases even English teachers as the available source of language input in formal classroom setting, lack the sufficient knowledge in second language (Curtis, 2003). Considering this issue, various audiovisual technologies could be employed in non-native ESL learning contexts that can provide opportunities for communicative English through different authentic materials, which may not have been initially produced or used for language learning purpose (Yuksel, 2009).

Films are a shift from the conventional and offer students realistic learning environments (Sherman, 2003). A single film-clip can be employed as the foundation for English skills practice: listening, speaking, vocabulary, pronunciation (Sommer, 2001). By making use of films in the English classroom, students can enhance their vocabulary awareness and they can even make their pronunciation and intonation much better (Curtis, 2007). This paper will focus on the use of audio-visual technologies, such as films, in the English language classroom, with a view to suggest the incorporation of these audiovisual technologies for non-native learners of English language.
LEARNING FROM FILMS IS STIMULATING AND ENJOYABLE

For many students, films are their initial contact with English-speaking culture. Films are a useful means for students to listen to authentic spoken communication and be exposed to various features of spoken communication, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, voice modulation, accent, speech pace, tone etc (Sherman, 2003; Webb, 2010). And since there are many films based upon a vast number of topics, themes, and issues, the teachers could use them to initiate or stimulate discussions about a certain focus area, be it a historical event, a time period or the culture of a foreign country. Films also offer English language teachers with a good opportunity to bring in local themes, natural discourse, and cultural information (Curtis, 2007). They are an ideal way of engaging the students and being advantageous in second language learning at the same time, and teachers could go back over particular clips of the film to give attention to specific phrases or expressions (Goldstein & Driver, 2014). Films are a fun way for students to relax/unwind and learn all at the same time. Not to mention, by bringing popular films into ESL lessons, English teachers could guide students how they can learn from and practice English when watching films in their own time (Sherman, 2003). Motivation is amongst the most crucial factors in considering effective second-language acquisition (Liversidge, 2000). Films and also are an inclusive piece of students’ lives today so it makes perfect sense to integrate them into the language classroom. Film, as a motivator, additionally renders the language learning process a lot more enjoyable and entertaining.

FILMS PROVIDES AUTHENTIC AND DIVERSE LANGUAGE SCENARIOS

An added advantage of using films in the ESL classroom is that it offers a source of authentic and diverse language scenarios. Films present students with instances of English used in ‘real’ situations outside the classroom, specifically interactive language – the language of real-life communication. Films expose students to natural expressions and the natural flow of speech (Butler-Pascoe & Wiburg, 2003). If the students are not living in an English-speaking environment, quite likely only films and television can offer learners with this real-life language input.

FILMS GIVE A VISUAL CONTEXT

The ‘visuality’ of films makes it a valuable language teaching tool, facilitating learners to learn better by interpreting the language in a complete visual context (Long, 2003). Films aid the learners’ comprehension by enabling them to listen to language exchanges and see such visual supports as facial expressions and gestures simultaneously (Gruba, 2006). These visual clues support the verbal message and provide a focus of attention.

VARIETY AND FLEXIBILITY

Films can bring variety and flexibility to the language classroom by broadening the choice of teaching techniques and resources, aiding students to develop communicative skills (Jeng, Wang, & Huang, 2009). For instance, an entire film or part could be used to practice listening and reading, and as a device for speaking and writing. It can also function as a springboard for follow-up activities such as discussions, debates on local/social themes, role plays, reconstructing a dialogue or summarising (Kaiser, 2011). It is also possible to bring additional range to the language learning classroom by showing different types of films: feature-length films, short films, trailers, video-clips and advertisements.

Given the advantages of using films in the ESL learning classroom, it is far from surprising that many teachers are eager to use films with their students, and a growing number of them are effectively integrating films into the language-learning syllabus. Until quite lately it was difficult to find pedagogically relevant film resources to help students improve their language through watching films, and teachers had to devote countless hours developing their own teaching resources (Keddie, 2014). However, with the onset of the internet there is now a wealth of online resources for both English language teachers and their students (Keddie, 2014).
THE USE OF FILMS IN ESL LEARNING
There is a general agreement among foreign/second language instructors that other than textbooks, audiovisual technologies can be utilized in second language learning. The integration of different audio-visual technologies, such as films, as sources of authentic language input into language learning, have been the focus of many studies. Chapple and Curtis (2000) conducted a study on the employment of different films as authentic and relevant teaching materials in content-based teaching strategies in EFL classrooms in Southeast Asia. The research focused on how intrinsically stimulating materials such as films together with content-based teaching can help to enhance English language learning. As reported by Chapple and Curtis (2000), films have numerous cross-cultural values, offer remarkable foundation for the development of critical thinking skill, supply a rich means of content for language learners, and provide linguistic diversities. All these features of films combined with the motivating characteristic facilitate language learners’ oral communication skills (Chapple & Curtis, 2000). Identical studies were also carried by Heffernan (2005) and Gebhardt (2004) emphasising on the enhancement of motivation and language learning by means of films in English language classrooms.

HOW TO USE FILMS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM?
There are various ways to teach English to second language learners with the help of films. Students learn a language uniquely, according to their own specific learning abilities. While students develop learning abilities in different ways, the majority of students are visual learners and films are an ideal means for acquiring a second language. It is inevitable that films present language in a manner that is often more natural than that found in course-books, the visual context improves understanding and enhances listening, and students just simply love them. The question is not if teachers can use films in the ESL classroom, but which ones to use and how to use them.

Films can be introduced in a language classroom as an English learning aid. There are many techniques employed to introduce a film to students. Films are effective means for learning a language, as long as students are presented with a variety of visual and relevant contexts in a movie. English teachers can use the film to expose the students to the four language skills; listening, while watching the movie and reading, writing and speaking in later tasks/activities after the film has been watched.

THINGS NEEDED TO PRESENT A FILM IN THE CLASSROOM
- A movie (fiction, drama, cartoon, documentary, etc.)
- Laptop or desktop computer
- Movie projector
- Speakers

SUITABLE FILMS FOR THE ESL CLASSROOM
Before showing the film to students, it is essential that teachers select a film that is in line with the areas they're attempting to teach, to ensure that the students can connect the film content to the subject areas taught in the classroom. Make an effort to use films whose content material is popular. There are many films whose content is reliable and well suited for all ages and cultures. However, a number of contemporary films, which have popular content, but in some cases may have explicit and unsuitable scenes related to crime, sex, violence, death etc within them. Teachers should refrain from using these kinds of films.

BEFORE WATCHING ACTIVITY IN THE ESL CLASSROOM
A before watching activity could possibly be an alternative way to present a movie to ESL learners. Have the students watch an excerpt of the film and identify what the film is going to be about. Teachers could give them a fill in the blank
activity with vocabulary words linked to the plot in the film. For higher level students, teachers could have them form discussion groups and talk about the characters in the film and their individual features. To conduct this activity, teachers might have to introduce a list of descriptive adjectives to their students.

WHILE WATCHING ACTIVITIES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Anytime during the presentation of the film, reduce the volume and have the students restructure the dialogues based on what they're watching. Teachers may also stop the film after a brief watching time period and ask questions concerning who stated what to whom, for instance, who said “he has the missing key” to whom? Teachers could also have the students identify a specific actor or actress by the lines of their dialogue, such as a quote or phrase, during a particular given scene.

AFTER WATCHING ACTIVITIES IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

After watching the movie, the students may take part in an over-all discussion of the film and the major events that represented it. Have groups of students develop a written and spoken summary of the film to be presented to the entire class. Establish a debate in the classroom by creating two groups, one group in favour of and the other against general ideas covered in the film.

LIST OF FILMS FOR THE ESL CLASSROOM

Let us focus on considering which films to use. Certainly there are cultural aspects and age factors that need to be regarded. There could even be religious issues. But these are often simply a matter of sound judgment and wise practice. More challenging to tackle is the issue of the students’ level. Some recent films may have too much slang and idioms to make them suitable for lower level learners, and may be appropriate for more advanced learners who are keen on the nuances idiomatic language. I suggest the following films:

- The Harry Potter Series
- The Chronicles of Narnia trilogy
- Finding Nemo
- E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial
- The Karate Kid

TIPS

When making use of films in ESL classroom, although, there are few important factors that must be taken care of. Firstly, students need to keep in mind that they are not supposed to comprehend or fully grasp every word. Non-native English language learners can watch an English movie even without subtitles and still get a reasonable idea of what is going on merely from the scenes, the tone of the actors' voices etc. Secondly, and this is for both teacher and students, using films in class is not an opportunity to 'pass time'. It should be quite the contrary in real-time classroom environments. Its application in the classroom for teaching is intensive, and it demands skill and hard work, both effective and useful for the both teachers and students when done properly; as the teachers, all things considered, not just ‘showing the film’, they are teaching (and students are learning) English. Thirdly, avoid showing the entire movie. It’s easy to do this, and students will want it, nonetheless it isn’t what the ESL lesson should be about. Snippets of a film and a high-quality dose of the ‘pause’ key/button fulfil everyone’s final objective significantly better (Soong, 2012).

How English teachers actually use the film in ESL class will be based mainly on the level of the students and what the purpose of the lesson is. In a lesson based on culture and literature during the Victorian era, for example, the language on its own could very well be secondary. Is the film intended to build classroom environment, cement a pre-learnt grammar
theme, or initiate a fresh theme, or simply establish a context for additional teaching? In certain situations the film and its context can provide the foundation for a classroom discussion.

The rationale behind using films in ESL class traces closely that of employing the cassette player. Build up with a pre-viewing activity, have an activity for while viewing, and follow up with a post-viewing activity. Have a relatively lucid objective behind utilising the film, otherwise the lesson degenerates into a baby-sitting situation. Prepare students for challenges beforehand by providing vocabulary, or reassure them that they need not stress. When students get impatient or curious, be open to unusual queries and comments.

There are a lot other techniques to teach a second language with films. Although there are myriad approaches to present a film to ESL learners, the tips that I have presented in this article could result in the more effective and constructive acquisition of a second language. Teachers can modify the approach based on the level of their students; however, the success achieved could be more effective if the presentation of the film is supported with active engagement of the students.

CONCLUSION

Students typically present a lot of interest when watching English language films. The teacher’s goal is to channel this enthusiasm in a direction that has a constructive influence on their language learning. The fundamental key to the productive application of films in the ESL classroom is situated in the innovative presentation of films and in the design of challenging, but practical, learning tasks which are enjoyed by ESL students. Teachers and facilitators should induce and cultivate motivation by focusing on teaching-learning objectives, and attainable tasks employing films which might normally be beyond the linguistic ability of the students.

The remarkable developments, easy accessibility and inexpensive usability of different audiovisual technologies can provide natural language learning environments for non-native learners of English. This article aimed at highlighting the implications of using audio-visual technologies such as films on boosting the English language proficiency of non-native learners. Accordingly, it is suggested that greater exposure to audio-visual technologies, such as films, can lead to growth in second language acquisition to a significant extent in non-native English language learning environments.

One of the most important pedagogical implications is that the use of films holds great potential in ESL learning context, but it should be conducted carefully by English teachers and in consultation with experts. English teaching solutions don’t lie in films; they lie in what English teachers do with films in the ESL classroom. Moreover, though films offer an innovative opportunity to help English teachers in teaching more effectively, its future success is entirely dependent on support of the schools. Schools need to be more open to change and support and promote the use of films in the ESL classroom.

REFERENCES


Inc.


