

Using Video Movies in Listening Class

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Video is becoming more and more popular as a teaching tool. It lets students experience natural English in a somewhat natural setting. Presently, however, there is very little useful, commercially produced video material for teaching EFL. The television, however, is an excellent source of English. Taped television programs, although presently caught up in legal battles about ownership and use, provide good material for learners of English. The following article will cover choosing material, presenting it in class, and evaluation of material used.

Choosing Material: Length

When choosing video material, length is very important. It is not important in the usual sense, as *you do not have to cover all the material in one class*. In fact video is ideally designed for carrying over from one day to the next. Length is important in letting the student become familiar with the characters so that the students are able to better understand what the characters are saying and trying to accomplish.

Short thirty minute segments (time is given in TV time including commercials) do not usually allow the students to become familiar with the characters. If a couple of segments are available from a series like this, there is no problem. But a single short segment is not enough.

As to cartoons—they are usually very hard. The language is often distorted and artificial, the situation is unrealistic, and they are very cultural in nature. For a very advanced class, they have value; but, for most students, they are too hard.

Full length programs (usually about one hour) can be good material. With many, the students can become familiar with the characters and the situation. The language and situation are not too rushed. But a word of caution is in order—they may move too fast and the dialogs may be too artificial in attempting to wind up the plot in an hour. A good program is *Quincy*. A poor one is *Magnum, P.I.*

Feature films run two hours and give a full development of the characters. While you may not be too familiar with them at the beginning, by the end you know all that you need to and more. Students are able to escape into the characters as they develop. The films last long enough to use up the student enthusiasm without causing boredom. They are short enough so that students who are not interested in that film have a hope of seeing something that interests them before the term is over.

The final type is the series that lasts eight to twelve hours (eg., *Winds of War*). While being excellently done, they are too long, especially for students who don't like that subject matter (i.e. World War II). Students who like it are also frustrated, as it is hard to finish in one term (12 weeks) a program of this length.

I always use the full film and not clips. Students like to have a full story with which to work. They hate it when they get only a part of the story. They feel that there is information lacking that they need for understanding, and they worry about that lack. Students like to have an idea of what happened before and to take it to a logical conclusion before they leave it. A film clip rarely does that.

Choosing Material: Language

Length is only one thing that has to be considered. Another point is the type of language. First there must be clarity of language. The standard will vary greatly with the ability of the students. If they have not watched a movie before, they need one with very clear language. This does not mean that the language should be unnatural. A good cause of clear language is in the movie *The Mirror Crack'd*. After watching one film, students are usually ready for less clear language. I have found that John Wayne movies generally contain less clear but normal language. Exposing students to language like this in a large context is very rewarding. A rather good example is *McQ*. On the other hand, material with excessive mumbling, such as *Rocky*, is not good.

Besides being reasonably clear, the language must be idiomatic. The degree of idiomaticity needs to be determined by the type of students you have. Good students can handle fairly normal idiomatic dialog, but they will still need preparation for specialized idioms such as those found in science fiction and war movies. For this reason, science fiction and war movies tend not to be good first movies. But, as a second or third movie, science fiction can provide a lot of useful contemporary idiomatic language. Low-level students, of course, need language with few idioms. For them, the language needs to be straightforward.

Choosing Material: Setting

A third area of consideration when selecting movies is the setting. If only one movie is going to be used, almost any setting is acceptable. When you use more than one during a term, however, there should be some variety. This will appeal to the students in two ways. First, they won't repeat the same type of situation, and they will experience language in more than one style. Second, the students who did not

really enjoy the first setting won't have to suffer through it again. If you use a detective story the first time, use a romance the second. Go from the 1930's to the distant future.

Choosing Material: Non-Dialog Sections

A final consideration in selection is the proportion of non-dialog sections. You need non-dialog sections to provide relaxation time while watching. The movies of the thirties and forties are great for dialog, but they go on and on. The long dialogs often overwhelm students. Modern productions are nice in that they break up the story with action scenes that help to clarify what was said. But these sections should not be overdone. If there is too much of this, not much language is learned. The James Bond films tend to have too little dialog. Also, the dialog is in such small hunks that the students don't learn anything. Again, a balance is needed.

Presenting Material

When you present the film to the students it needs to be broken up into manageable sections. In a class hour of fifty minutes, I find sections of eight to twelve minutes to be ideal. This allows each segment to be seen two times in each class period and still leaves time for a lot of discussion. Segments shorter than eight minutes leave too much dead time at the end of class.

In determining where to place the break, try to find a spot where there is action anticipated. Find a spot that will leave them guessing about what comes next so they will be eager to see the next section. In *The Mirror Crack'd*, the scene where the doors swing open and someone approaches Jane Marple makes a good break point. The students want to know what is going to happen to her. Let them worry about it until the next class. In their discussion they

will anticipate what will happen. I won't spoil the movie for you by telling.

A Sample Lesson Presentation

The students watch each segment two times. For the first showing I do not give them any vocabulary work. I play the tape and then break them up into small groups (4-5 students) to discuss what they saw and heard. (If there is a problem due to the film's historical setting, I will clarify that.) They have to try to work out what actually happened during the segment and to link it with what they have seen before. They provide the clues that are needed from the previous sections. I don't. I avoid all large group discussion and question asking at this time. I have found that if they go to the large group after seeing it only once there is too much hesitation. They are afraid to get involved.

After about ten minutes of discussion I play the same segment again. As it is playing, I put the important and/or difficult vocabulary on the blackboard. After the segment is finished, I try to elicit explanations of the vocabulary. I do not wait a long time for these as I am not trying to do intensive vocabulary development. Neither do I spend time working on other uses for these vocabulary items. My examples are based on situations similar to what they saw in the film. Some teachers might think this would be a good time for exercises using the vocabulary. I don't think so. I want them interested in understanding the overall film. I get through the vocabulary quickly and go back to the discussion of the segment. I want them to work on understanding.

When there is a short time left in the hour (about five minutes), I move to a large group discussion and question session. This allows the students to bring up things that they could not discover or solve in their small groups. I get the answers from others, and I avoid giving direct answers myself. I

use questions that pull out the information that they need in order to answer their questions. The focus is on the students finding the answers through group cooperation and discussion.

Summaries for Evaluation and Comprehension

Covering the material in class this way does not tell me who really understood what happened. To determine individual's level of comprehension, I have the students write summaries after every three or four segments. From these I can see where they are having trouble, and I straighten out general problems at the beginning of the next class. The summaries also force them to bring the whole story together. I also have them do a summary when we finish a film. It may seem like a lot of work to correct and evaluate all those summaries, but it is worth the effort. To prevent students from trying to write a dictation of the film's dialog and to keep my work load humane, I let them to do only one-page summaries. I will not accept anything longer. They have to make sure that they evaluate the material properly and include only the important things.

Evaluation of the Learning Experience

Finishing the in-class presentation of the film does not end the instructional process. It is important to evaluate what happened to the students and to see if it can be made better. The first thing to evaluate is the naturalness of the language that the students developed. Did the students develop a better feel for listening to the language in normal situations? Or did they learn too many limited expressions that they can't use again or that they misuse when they try? These are questions that have to be answered separately for each class.

Other questions relate to the video material used. What was the weakness of

the movie? Will the next one compensate for that? The answers to these questions will tell the teacher what to do next.

It is also necessary to look at how the students felt about the film. Was it something that the students found enjoyable? Do not rule out the use of historical films because often the students find them to be very enjoyable. I have used the film *Ivanhoe* in class, and the students loved it. True, there were a lot of terms for things we don't use in modern society. But the language was natural and the overall situation was natural. And the terms did apply to speaking about Japanese history. On the other hand, a movie like *The French Lieutenant's Woman* would be very hard to use because the plot is complicated and the situation is unreal for many. Many native speakers have trouble with it. After each movie you would reassess what appeals to your class—what is natural and enjoyable for them.

Language is not limited to just the words written or said. Language goes beyond that. What were the visual effects of the movie? Did they aid in understanding? These are important considerations in evaluating a movie. Beautiful scenery is not what is important. Another question to be considered is did the film involve the emotions of the students. Students

understand more when they feel something about the actions. If a film is boring, having good language will not help the student much. Also, how were the sound effects? The music can greatly affect what is understood. I don't like to use films where the music score is overwhelming. It takes away too much from the language. But some music can aid students' understanding. All of these points need to be considered before using a video a second time.

Summary

Video can be fun to use in class. It really helps your students improve their listening comprehension. It is not that hard for teachers to find good material. There is a lot available on the television every week. While movies are preferred, they are not the only thing. There are also series that can be used. With this wealth of material and a little preparation, a good program can be established using video material.

About the Author

Lawrence Cisar has been teaching at Athènèe Français in Tokyo for over twelve years. He has been using movies in the classroom for the last three years. Before receiving his MAT from the School for International Training, he was in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan.