



Learning English with Mrs. Doubtfire : Using Movies in an EFL Classroom

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Introduction

“I want to watch western movies” is always the top choice in my questionnaires from students about what they want to do in my English classes. “I want to use movies in my English classes, but I don’t know how to start” is also frequently being voiced and discussed in workshops for English teachers about how to use movies in English classes. Watching movies is fun. Few people would deny it. But what movies are suitable for learners, what activities can be used in class, and how to use them are not easy questions to answer. In the past few years, I have used movies in my English classes and have done a number of activities in listening, speaking, reading and writing. The purpose of this paper is to introduce some workable ideas based on my teaching experiences using movies in an ESL classroom.

Using films as a classroom medium

Movies offer language learners opportunities to experience spoken language in action in a real communicative situation. With the visual information accompanying the language, learners can see what the setting of the story is and what the characters look like, which both provide contextual information and help learners understand the content of the movie. What is more important is that learners can learn different types of vocabulary, structures, expressions, and pronunciation through dialogues between people in natural situations. The movie, with the combination of vision and sound, is definitely an exciting way of exposing learners to the target language.

Choosing suitable films for learners

There are some things you should keep in mind when selecting films for students:

1. The films may contain some sensitive materials, such as bad languages, sexual, violent scenes, which we should avoid showing to the students. Don’t use a movie without watching it first.
2. The films may contain accents that students are not familiar with, or the speed of speech in the film may be too fast for them to understand. These features may make the film too difficult for students.
3. It is useful to use a film which has subtitles in English. This can be fully exploited in some classroom activities, such as dictation and post-recording(see below).
4. It may be helpful to choose a film whose theme is not too serious or complex for the students to understand. The film may contain political, ethical, or religious topics which might leave the

students at a loss. I recommend films dealing with topics related to animals, children, or family. It will help if the characters in the film are not too many and if the story is a heart-warming one.

Using the movie *Mrs. Doubtfire* in an EFL classroom : Materials, activities, and suggestions

In the past few years, I have used the film *Mrs. Doubtfire* in my English class and have created some activities using it in four skills, especially in listening and speaking. Students love the movie and enjoy watching it. They also actively participate in the activities. For example, during the post-recording activity (in which the students say the lines watching silent scenes), I ask them to speak just like the characters in the film, including the rhythm and intonation and the speed of speech. It seems to be a big challenge to them. At first, they tend to stop or give up when the speed of speech gets too fast to follow. After a few times of trying, however, I can see the students enjoying the challenge and then feeling a sense of achievement when they accomplish the activity. Most of them even applaud after finishing the activity. It seems like a celebration for them. I am convinced that the movie definitely is an enjoyable medium which provides students with opportunities to be exposed to real speech that they can understand, thereby helping them to learn the language.

The film Mrs. Doubtfire

Mrs. Doubtfire is a comedy film starring Robin Williams, Sally Field and Harvey Fierstein (made in 1993 by 20th Century Fox (PG)). The storyline is easy to understand and is for everybody. It is a heart-warming movie which gives you a lot of laughs and tears. Through this movie, we can catch a glimpse of the divorce situation in the U.S. This movie reminds us of the importance of family bonds. The following is a brief summary of the story:

Daniel Hillard (Robin Williams), a gifted voice-over actor, has a unique fondness for his three children, but is unable to hold down a steady job. When his wife Miranda (Sally Field) asks him for a divorce, Daniel is left in an unfortunate situation. Miranda gets sole custody of the children, and Daniel is allowed to see his children only one day a week, which he is not satisfied with at all. When Daniel learns that Miranda is hiring a housekeeper, he asks his brother (Harvey Fierstein), an expert makeup artist, to turn him into a woman. Her name is Mrs. Doubtfire, a 60-year old Scottish nanny who quickly becomes a housekeeper for the family. Thus, Daniel is able to return to his kids' lives full-time as Mrs. Doubtfire. However, Daniel's acting turns out to be too good to conceal his identity, leading to disastrous consequences.

How to get started with Mrs. Doubtfire

The first thing I did for using *Mrs. Doubtfire* in my class was to purchase the video (*Mrs. Doubtfire*. VHS, 20th Century Fox, 1996) and the whole script of the movie (Soneda, K. et al., 1996. *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Nagoya : Screenplay Corp.). There is a website (<http://www.screenplay.co.jp>) where you can find information about movies and how to purchase their screenplays. For creating classroom activities using movies, the availability of the scripts is essential. The next thing I did was to divide the script into 10 sections (each section maximally 10 minutes long), one for each class. It is difficult

for students to maintain interest or to concentrate on a clip that is more than 10 minutes long. I basically followed the screenplay *Mrs. Doubtfire* in dividing the script into the following 10 sections: (1)The San Diego Zoo, (2)Visitation Rights, (3)Transformation, (4)Split Personality, (5)Burnt Rubber, (6)Exposed Parts, (7)A Run-by Fruiting, (8)Bridges, (9>Show's Over, (10)The Ties That Bind

Classroom activities and teaching materials using Mrs. Doubtfire

In this section, activities and teaching materials using *Mrs. Doubtfire* are introduced in three parts: (i)Review of the previous section, (ii)Before watching the movie, and (iii)After watching the movie.

(i) Review of the previous section

< Summarizing >

I wrote a summary of what happened in the previous section of the movie based on the script and passed it out to the students. The summary consisted of both summary statements and quotes from the movie and was designed to let the students recall the story so far as well as review the words and phrases appeared in the previous section. In addition, the summary contained some blanks for the students to fill in with the words provided below. (See Appendix A for a summary of Section 2 'Visitation Rights'.)At the same time, a separate list of these words was handed out to the students. The words in this list were followed by definitions mostly in English. (See Appendix B for a vocabulary list for Section 2 'Visitation Rights'.)

The activity proceeds as follows. First, I read aloud each word and its definition from the vocabulary list. Then I read the summary filling in the missing words. While I read the summary, the students have to follow each line while listening to me very carefully so that they can fill in the blanks. Moreover, while doing this, the students are forced to understand the meaning of the summary through English because there is no time for them to do English-Japanese translation. This is good practice in thinking in English.

< Reading out loud >

After completing the summary, I call on the students to read the summary out loud sentence by sentence. One student reads the first sentence, another student reads the second sentence, and so on. This activity proceeds like this in a "relay" style. The purpose of this activity is to let the students get used to reading out loud in English, which, surprisingly, most students have not done on a regular basis in high school. In the beginning, they may read in soft voices or with Japanese accents (often deliberately) because they are afraid their pronunciation might not be good enough or that they are too shy to get into the English mode. But once they get used to the relay style, there seems to be no time for them to be afraid or shy but to concentrate on reading out loud when the turn comes. Through this activity, students gradually come to speak with more confidence. I have found their improvement quite remarkable.

(ii) Before watching the movie

< Comprehension questions >

Comprehension questions are prepared for the students to think about while watching a particular section of the movie. (See Appendix C for comprehension questions from Section 2 ‘Visitation Rights’.) Students are given a handout containing these questions and read them in advance so they will know what to listen for before watching the movie. It also helps prevent the students from falling asleep while watching the movie, because they know they will be asked these questions after viewing. It is said that one disadvantage of using a movie in an ESL classroom is that students tend to fall asleep while watching. Having comprehension questions before viewing is also a way to keep them fully awake.

(iii) After watching the movie

< Follow-up activity >

After watching the section, the answers to the comprehension questions are discussed. First, students are asked to answer the questions in English. If they cannot answer them in English, Japanese is allowed. The main purpose of this activity is to see how much they have understood the main points of the movie. Usually I only give answers orally in English without writing them on the board so that the students will have to concentrate on listening to me and thus will have opportunities to practice listening comprehension.

< Focus on a scene >

In this final phase, I pick one scene from the section and provide the whole script of the scene. The purpose is to have the students learn the details of an important part and act them out. This phase consists of three activities : (a) dictation (b) role playing, and (c) post-recording.

(a) Dictation

A script of a dialogue from the section is distributed which contains gaps for the students to fill in. (See Appendix D for a script of a scene in Section 2 ‘Visitation Rights’.) Students watch the scene of the dialogue twice. In the first viewing, they watch the scene to get the gist of the dialogue. In the second viewing, they only listen to the dialogue with the pictures turned off. This allows them to concentrate more on English to catch the words in question. Finally, I check the answers calling on the students.

(b) Role playing

After the dictation practice, students get into pairs to practice the dialogue. It is important to remind them to switch roles in role playing. This will give them opportunities to practice conversing in English. Having just seen how the characters in the scene perform, the students seem to easily get into character and enjoy acting out the dialogue. “Read and look up” could be used in practicing the dialogue to make this activity a little more challenging.

(c) Post-recording

As a round-up exercise, I turn off the sound of the film and let the students supply the sound by saying the lines looking at the screen. Here, a film with English subtitles is useful because it allows the students to watch the scene as they say the lines. Without subtitles, you need to look down at the script (unless you have completely memorized the lines) to say the lines, which often makes it too difficult to get the timing right. This activity is different from role playing in pairs in one respect: the speed of speech. When doing the pair work, students could speak as slowly as they want. But the post-recording activity requires them to speak as fast as the actors in the film. This added difficulty makes the activity more challenging. Initially, the students tend to falter when the speed of speech gets too fast to handle. But after a few trials, they start to get the hang of it. In the end, they appear to enjoy the excitement of the challenge, which culminates in the applaud they give each other when the activity is over. A nice way to finish up the class, indeed.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have introduced a way to use a movie effectively in an EFL classroom. Undoubtedly, this is only one way and there must be other good or better ways to exploit the movie resources. Movies have that much potential for EFL teaching. I hope that this paper will give some hints on how to get started to those teachers who are wondering how to use a movie in their classes, as well as contribute to the development of effective English teaching methods using movies.

Appendix A : A summary

Visitation Rights(2)

A. A summary of last week's Mrs. Doubtfire

S1 : Daniel Hillard was a voice-over actor. One day, he was doing a voice-over for a _____ film. When the film got to the part where a bird was smoking a cigarette, Daniel _____ a few lines saying, "I don't want to get beak cancer. No! My lungs are blackened." He did so because he didn't want to "promote smoking to the youth of America" by showing the smoking scene. However, his action angered his boss and Daniel was _____ from his job.

S2 : After leaving the studio, Daniel went to _____ his kids, Lydia(aged 13), Chris(aged 12), and Natalie(aged 5). It was Chris' twelfth birthday and Daniel had arranged a surprise party for Chris at his home.

S3 : When Daniel and his children got home, the yard was filled with animals such as geese, chickens, ponies, and rabbits. Yes, Daniel had brought a zoo to his home! However, Gloria, the Hillards' next door neighbor, was so _____ by the animals and the noise that she called Miranda, Daniel's wife, working at a design firm.

S4 : At the design firm, Miranda's boss spoke to her about the phone call he had received from Stuart Dunmire, an old _____ of Miranda's. The boss said that Dunmire was putting millions of dollars into _____ an old Mansion and that he _____ Miranda to design it. Miranda agreed to _____ Dunmire first thing the next day. Then, she got a phone call from Gloria about the party at her home.

S5 : Miranda arrived home carrying a birthday cake for Chris. She _____ to the police in front of the house. She entered the house and was shocked by the scene. She was really mad to find Daniel and her kids dancing in the dining room. Daniel made an excuse by saying that he was going to have everything cleaned up before she got home. Miranda reached for the stereo cord and _____ it, ending the party.

S6 : Later, Miranda and Daniel had a _____ argument shouting at each other, until at last Miranda suggested their marriage was over. Daniel insisted it was not over and that there must be solutions. However, Miranda would not listen and said she wanted a divorce.

Vocabulary

ad-libbed,	apologized,	annoyed,	unplugged,	pick up,	acquaintance
get in touch with,	restoring,	fired,	asked for,	bitter,	cartoon

Appendix B : A vocabulary list

Vocabulary

- ad-libbed : to say something without preparation
apologized : to say sorry to somebody
annoyed : to feel irritated by something or somebody
unplugged : pull out the plug
pick up : 車で迎えに行く
acquaintance : someone you know
get in touch with : contact
restoring : to bring back to a former condition
fired : dismissed
asked for : to request
bitter : angry
cartoon : animation

Appendix C : Comprehension questions

B. Watch the video and answer the following questions.

1. What does Daniel's brother, Frank, do for a living?

_____.

2. In court, who is awarded sole custody of the children?

_____.

3. According to the judge, how often can Daniel see their children?

_____.

4. How often does Mrs. Sellner, Daniel's court liaison, say she will visit Daniel to inspect his place?

_____.

5. Daniel got a new job at a TV studio. What does he do?

_____.

6. Miranda is placing an ad for a housekeeper. What did Daniel do to the ad? Why did he do that?

_____.

Appendix D: A script of a scene

C. Script

(Miranda and Stuart Dunmire are in the conference room of the design firm talking)

S: Can we talk over dinner, _____?

M: Oh, Stuart, thank you. I...I...I...huh...I'm at the beginning of a divorce. It just didn't

_____.

S: Oh, Miranda. I'm sorry.

M: No, look, you don't have to say that.

S: No, really... I mean I never _____ any grudges or anything. I just... Well, I always hoped you'd find _____...

M: Oh, God, that's so nice.

S: I mean, I was just _____ about coming in here. I, I thought I might _____ you _____ the project.

M: Oh, no, no, no, of course not! I... I'm a professional. I'm...I'm... I was _____ that you thought of me after all these years and everything.

S: Everything. Well... ancient history.

M: Yeah.

S: Yeah. I'm late. I've got a meeting over at the bank.

M: Oh.

S: Can we talk maybe later in the week?

M: Sure.

S: It's good to see you again.