

Utilizing Film to Enhance Student Discussion of Sociocultural Issues

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This article introduces a technique for designing a university EFL/ESL course which utilizes film to enhance student discussion of sociocultural issues. The article gives some background into theory behind content-based learning. It then outlines a method for making a 15-week university EFL/ESL course in which students practice critical thinking skills in conducting tasks that will enable them to become more capable members of discussions in English about sociocultural issues of importance in not only cultures and societies different to their own, but also that which surrounds them.

Introduction

Whilst films often bring together a number of elements discussed as effective in increasing the motivation of EFL/ESL students, such as familiarizing learners with target culture, and making classes more interesting (Dornyei, 1998), teachers are often looking for new and different ways to make use of film in the classroom. The implementation of a course at the university level that involves the use of film ought to have a very clear idea of what aims or outcomes are to be for the learners, and not merely a time-filling exercise for everyone involved. The use of film for tasks such as focused listening (often to a variety of dialects or slang that students in EFL settings may not have recourse to encounter ordinarily), or for general comprehension purposes has been detailed elsewhere (see, for example, Hadley, 2001; Kusumarasyati, 2004). People watch films not to gain listening ability, but, for instance, to be entertained, or to think about some topic or issue they are either interested in or would like to think about more deeply. Films, as short, encapsulated studies in human society, provide excellent starting points from which to build a content-based course promoting learners' critical thinking and discussion skills, whilst bringing reflection through sociocultural comparison and contrast between their own society or culture and that of another country or countries.

Background

This paper introduces a course that has been developed at one women's university in Japan. The course is based around a topical or content-based syllabus, using segments from a film to introduce sociocultural issues. The advantages of content-based second language learning have been variously noted (see, for example, the CARLA CoBaLTT website), and are in line with current constructivist conceptions of education that encourage cooperative learning and individual construction of meaning (Kaufman, 2004). Of particular import for the course detailed here are ideas that content-based learning addresses students' needs, motivates them, allows for use of authentic material, and allows for more meaningful comprehension and use of linguistic form (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989; Mohan, 1986). Students gain motivation through exploring the issues raised in the film, relating them to their everyday lives and the society around them, whilst finding contrasts with other societies and cultures. There is an almost coincidental, yet natural and meaningful expansion of vocabulary and linguistic form as students are exposed to tasks which enable them to more deeply consider the issues from a variety of angles, in line with (but not overtly conscious of) DeBono's (1985) conception of focused thinking. There is a degree of learner negotiation as to the content, as the students are asked to consider what issues the film raises, and which they wish to pursue over the course of the semester.

Materials

This course makes use of a first and second film.

The first film provides the basis for the majority of classes, and as such should be something that both raises enough issues to be sustained for a semester, and is likely to retain students' interest over the course of a number of weeks. This author has used Jim Sheridan's *In America* for one course, and Richard Curtis' *Notting Hill* for another. Whilst some may argue for selection of films that deal with more controversial problems or deeper global issues (Fukunaga, 1998), it must be remembered that the course detailed here is used to discuss sociocultural issues that may share similarities between the students' culture and that displayed in the film – issues that the students can relate to, but maybe haven't considered in detail. Consequently, teachers ought to select films that they feel will provide a valuable base for comparison and contrast between the society represented in the film and that which surrounds the students - the society in which they are studying English.

The second film is used as part of the final project, and needs to have some correspondence to the first film. For example, this author has used Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* for the *In America* course, and Richard Curtis' *Love Actually* for the *Notting Hill* course. These films, whilst in many ways different to the first film, are similar in genre, and deal with many of the same issues, and consequently can be compared and contrasted by students in the final project.

The Fifteen-week Semester

Weeks 1-2: Viewing Film One

The first two weeks of the course involve a complete viewing of the first film with English subtitles. Students are given schema-instantiation tasks before each viewing, as well as viewing tasks (e.g. matching and distinguishing pictures, ordering, scanning for specific information at certain points, answering questions based on the input, and predicting tasks). They are also asked to consider what sociocultural issues are represented in the film – these will form the basis for the semester's work, leading to a more student-negotiated curriculum, the likelihood that the issues will be of interest to the students in that class, and hopefully a belief from the outset by the students that their opinions are going to be valued.

Weeks 3-7: Issues / Language (Dialects)

From the third week, one issue per week is covered. For example, students in the *In America* class suggested topics such as immigration and multicultural society, societal and cultural ideas of success and failure, poverty, death in different cultures, relationships and friendships, personality, acting for others, and sociocultural ideas of family. On the other hand, in the *Notting Hill* class, issues such as celebrity, ideas of fame, status, sociocultural definitions and treatment of gender, norms, the media, friendships and stereotypes were suggested. The topics and issues that students will come up with will vary to some extent with each group of learners. During this first period of classes, students generally carry out some schema-building or instantiating task related to the issue-of-the-day in pairs, undertake a knowledge-building or knowledge-sharing task that provides scaffolding for deeper understanding of the issue in groups or through a mingling activity, and participate in a viewing task (such as a listening cloze) of a clip that expresses the issue. Drawing upon the scaffolding provided in the first part of the lesson, students discuss the issue as shown in the film in groups, with guiding questions to provide focus.

Finally, after a discussion of the issue as shown in the film, students are introduced to some differences in dialects (for example, between British/American English, or Irish/American/African English) – focusing not on accents but actual usage or phrasal differences. Students then work in pairs or small groups to produce a short skit that both uses the introduced language, and shows the issue discussed, before presenting their skits to other class members. It is hoped that this creative use of the introduced language will make both the issue and the language more personalized for students.

Week 8: Mid-term Project

During this class, as a kind of review of the first half of semester, students are asked to choose one of the issues from the previous classes, and make a two minute skit in groups that uses some introduced language. This provides students with the opportunity to review the issues discussed, negotiate to collectively choose one in which they are interested or would like to express through a skit, and use language creatively for the purpose of talking about or expressing an issue. Students then show their skits to other class members, who undertake a peer-grading exercise.

Weeks 9-12: Issues / Film Criticism / Critical analysis of Issues Raised in Film

The second half of the semester leads towards the final project. During classes, students are encouraged to continue thinking about sociocultural issues, but, as a replacement of the dialect-language element of the first half of semester, methods of critically discussing the film as well as its representation of the sociocultural issues raised are introduced and practiced. Schema, knowledge-building / sharing and viewing tasks are still undertaken, but more time is spent on focused discussion and consensus-making tasks related to film criticism and issue-representation. Furthermore, leading to comparing and contrasting tasks in the following weeks and as part of the final project, students use t-charts to compare and contrast characters in the films.

Weeks 13-14: Viewing Film Two

Students are introduced to the final project. Before viewing the second film, students are asked whether they want English or Japanese subtitles – as the focus for the final project is on the issues and the films, and not comprehension of the English in the films as such, students ought to be given the choice (see Kusumarasdyati, 2004, for a discussion) – the In America / Magnolia class chose Japanese subtitles. Whilst watching the second film, students use a focused worksheet to compare and contrast the two films, both as films, and also for their discussion and representation of sociocultural issues.

Week 15: Final Project (Live Discussion)

Students are randomly broken into groups of six prior to this class. Each group comes at a different time, and discusses together the two films for approximately 30 minutes. The discussion is entirely student-created – the idea is that the students should find their own way collectively in analyzing critically the two films and the issues portrayed. The teacher observes, taking notes about contributions from students and any points that may need feedback after the discussion.

The students are graded individually on factors of:

1. Contribution,
2. Discussion of topics and issues,
3. Comparison and contrast of movies,
4. Involvement of other students, and
5. Clarity of ideas.

As can be seen from the grading factors, rather than a focus on evaluation of language form, students are graded on their ability to communicate their ideas and create a discussion together. It is hoped that, through the opportunities the students have had for focused thinking and discussion throughout the semester, along with the language they have encountered, they will be able to create together a discussion that evolves in a natural way, wending their way through the issues and topics that they wish to bring up, or that they feel comfortable discussing. There will most likely be a great deal of spontaneous communicative negotiation in defining the boundaries of the conversation, and, as the topics they wish to discuss will vary from student to student, students will be pushed to use all of the communicative resources at their command to express their meaning clearly, and help the discussion take shape.

Conclusion

Film can provide the foundation for a series of classes that encourage students to develop their second language abilities whilst deepening their understanding and thinking about sociocultural issues through discussion. Students may find motivation through the issues, as well their developing ability to apply critical thinking skills to discuss issues that relate not only to cultures and societies foreign to their own, but indeed in many aspects to the society around them.

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XV, No. 2, February 2009

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