

# Using Video to Develop Writing Fluency in Low-Proficiency ESL Students

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## Rationale

The years of grammar and vocabulary instruction given to most Asian students do little to help them express themselves in writing. Typically, they have considerable difficulty accessing the language resources they do have for any writing tasks which are not highly structured or formulaic, and little confidence in their own ability to express their ideas in English. I have found the following activity, using engaging and popular video materials, to be highly effective in eliciting creative, fluent and remarkably expressive writing from otherwise recalcitrant and unmotivated students.

## Summary

Students watch excerpts from a full-length video, accompanied by a viewing guide which allows them to follow the entire plot from start to finish. Following selected high-action scenes, students are asked to write a paragraph describing what they see, utilizing targeted vocabulary and grammatical structures.

## Procedure

As Davis (1998) points out, teaching with video is not a simple matter of pressing “Play” and telling students to watch! A significant amount of careful preparation is required to exploit the rich potential video can offer. The good news is that well-designed video-based activities can be successfully reused for years without ever becoming obsolete.

### A. Choose a Video

This requires careful consideration of several criteria:

#### Intelligibility

Can the students understand the language of the film? Don’t be afraid to challenge students with natural language. With a certain amount of written explanation and vocabulary instruction, along with contextual clues, students can understand far more than you (or they) might expect. When comprehension is exceptionally difficult, judicious use of English captions can be helpful, especially since listening comprehension is not the primary objective for this activity.

#### Appeal

The movie must be appealing and engaging to your students: motivation is the key element in this activity. In addition, as Tatsuki (2000) points out, the teacher should like the film as well! Enthusiasm is infectious; choose a film which you can wholeheartedly share with your students.

#### Language Objectives

You may wish to choose films which emphasize particular grammatical, curricular, or thematic objectives.

#### Length

Most teachers need to limit length to fit available class time. This is not as difficult as it seems, however, since extensive

sections can be cut from most films, while still maintaining an understanding of the entire plot. (See Examples B, C below).

## **Familiarity**

Consider whether or not students have already seen a highly popular film. In many cases, however, they will have seen it in their native language, not in English. This can in fact be a favourable choice, since students will be familiar with the story, but still be challenged by the language.

Here are some videos I've used with great success:

- *Mrs. Doubtfire*
- *Free Willy*
- *The Fugitive*
- *Witness*

## **B. Prepare the Viewing Guide**

1. Prepare some brief pre-viewing questions, as well as basic background information, to help establish the necessary schema.
2. Choose several short, engaging scenes (2 - 5 minutes each) with plenty of action for students to describe in writing. As Tatsuki (2000) points out, many of the key scenes will be found near the beginning of the movie.
3. Prepare a list of the vocabulary which is essential for describing each scene, and teach students these words, using whatever method works best for them. Simple, self-evident, multiple choice vocabulary-in-context exercises are recommended, to be done without dictionaries (see Example A, C below).
4. Review any grammatical structures that you wish students to practice, such as the present progressive or simple past tense. Tatsuki (1998) provides an excellent, detailed plan for focusing on the simple past in video-based written narratives.
5. Prepare short written explanations of what is happening in the overall plot, and between selected scenes. This will be important since students are not seeing the whole movie. Do NOT reveal what is happening in the selected scenes (Examples B, C).
6. Show a selected scene once, optionally with English subtitles. Ask the students to watch it "just for fun," without writing. (Alternatively, start by asking students to watch the scene without sound, and to speculate about what is happening).
7. Ask them to watch again, in preparation for writing. <>Ask students to describe the scene in writing, in as much detail as possible, using the targeted vocabulary\*. For less proficient students, you can provide basic sentence patterns at first, such as, "There is a \_\_\_\_\_." "The man is \_\_\_\_\_ing." "The children are \_\_\_\_\_ing." You know your students--provide the minimal necessary structure, while leaving opportunities for challenge. For more advanced students, try prompting them to encourage more detail. (For example: What kinds of animals did you see? What was Jesse doing? What kind of music did you hear? How did Glen feel?)
8. Circulate throughout the room and see what students are writing. If they are missing important details, show the scene again, pointing out what they have missed.
9. Ask students to hand in work for correction. To increase the effectiveness of this activity, have them rewrite the descriptions, incorporating your corrections. You can also put together a "model description," combining excerpts from the best of their writing. Make copies of this model and distribute it, as an ideal to aspire toward.

Once students are familiar with the movie, and experienced at describing what they see, ask them to predict what will happen. Then, watch the next scene to see if their predictions were correct.

### **\*Variation:**

*Writing a verb list.* If you are not totally averse to having students use their native language in class, ask them to quickly note only the actions they see, in their native language, while watching the scene. Afterward, they can translate the verbs into English and use this verb list as a basis for describing the scene in full sentences (Credit for this technique goes to Lisa Grimsley, my esteemed colleague at the University of Delaware's English Language Institute).

## **Post-Viewing Writing Tasks**

After completing all the selected scenes, there are excellent opportunities for more creative writing. In many cases, you will need to provide students with an example to study before they begin. **Do not** let them copy the example, however. I generally ask students to return the examples to me before writing, to eliminate any temptation!

### Here are some possibilities:

1. Ask students to write a letter to one of the characters, expressing their opinions about his or her situation (see Example D). More academically oriented students can write an essay about their favorite character, analyzing his/her strengths and weakness (Jones, 2004).
  2. Ask students to pretend to be one of the characters, and write one or more diary entries.
  3. Have students write a dialogue between two characters in the movie, which takes place after the film has ended, as a sort of sequel. Then ask them to enact their dialogue with a small group.
  4. Ask students to prepare a PowerPoint presentation about the movie, describing the main characters, plot, theme, and their personal opinions.
  5. Ask students to write a Movie Review, following a simple format.
  6. Students can draw a scene from the movie, and describe it in a full paragraph, incorporating targeted vocabulary or grammatical structures.
  7. Ask students to create an advertisement for the movie, including pictures, actors names, and imagined reactions from reviewers, ("Marvellous!" "I was on the edge of my seat!" "Gripping suspense!" "Don't miss it!" etc.) This can be done with computer graphics if students are able.
  8. More advanced students can write a "What if?" scenario, in which a movie ends differently. For example, for Mrs. Doubtfire, they could write about "What if Daniel didn't get the job as a TV show host?" Or, "What if Stewart found out at the beginning that Mrs. Doubtfire was not real?" etc.
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### Example A. Excerpt from Vocabulary in Context Exercise (*Free Willy*)

#### *Free Willy*: Vocabulary

Choose the best meaning for each underlined word in the sentences below.

1. adopt.

Maybe in the future Annie and Glen will decide to adopt Jesse. That would make him so happy!

- a. take a child as a permanent member of your family
- b. send a child away to school in another country
- c. send a child to live with grandparents after a death or divorce

2. foster parents

At the beginning of the movie, Jesse goes to live with Annie and Glen, his new foster parents.

- a. stepmother and stepfather
- b. temporary parents for an orphan
- c. grandparents

3. bucks

Jesse told Glen he wanted five bucks every week as spending money.

- a. animals in a forest
- b. food for lunch
- c. dollars

4. whale

Whales used to be hunted in all the oceans of the world, until almost all were killed.

- a. the world's largest animal

- b. big fish
- c. big ships for fishing

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### Example B. Excerpt from Viewing Guide for *Free Willy*

#### *Free Willy*: Viewing Guide

Beginning: Jesse, the main character, is an orphan. His father is dead, and his mother went away years ago. He is a bad boy, living on the street with his friends, and stealing.

Describe what you see in the first scene, below.

(Start at beginning of movie).

1. Jesse and his friends are talking. Jesse sees some food . . . \_\_\_\_\_

(Stop when the police car comes).

Jesse and his friend hide in an aquarium building. They spray graffiti on the walls, and on a big tank where Willy, the orca whale, lives. The police catch Jesse. **(STOP video. FF to the scene where he arrives at Glen and Annie’s house, where he will live. Resume viewing)**. As punishment, he will have to work at the aquarium without pay, cleaning up the paint he sprayed on the walls and tank. Jesse goes to live with foster parents, Glen and Annie, who want to take care of him. Jesse does not like them. Watch as Jesse arrives at his new home, and describe what you see. Don’t worry about understanding every word, just watch the characters and write about what you see.

**Teacher’s note:** This scene can be shown once without the sound, to focus on visual input, then a second time with sound.

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### Example C. Excerpt from Viewing Guide with Vocabulary in Context-(*Mrs. Doubtfire*)

**Vocabulary in Context.** Circle the correct meaning for the following underlined words. Do NOT use your dictionary for this exercise.

1. I heard David swear when he accidentally fell and dropped all the dishes.
  - a. go to sleep
  - b. use bad words in a loud, angry, voice
  - c. sing a song
  
2. We didn’t feel like cooking, so we bought some take-out food in Chinatown.
  - a. strong, athletic
  - b. intelligent
  - c. cooked food which you buy and take home to eat

3. My mother added some salt to the soup, then put the **lid** back on the pot.

- a. cover for a pot or jar
- b. dishes
- c. insects

4. When the water started to **boil**, it was time to prepare the tea.

- a. (very hot water) to bubble and steam
- b. dry
- c. break

*(continued)*

### **Mrs. Doubtfire at Work**

Mrs. Doubtfire, of course, gets the job. Miranda loves her, and the children learn to love her too, even though she is very strict with them--more strict than Daniel ever was! She has some problems with cooking, however. Describe what you see in this scene. Use the following vocabulary in your description:

**(Stop where Mrs. Doubtfire leaves the house).**

swear; boil; boil over; catch fire; stove; put out(a fire); spatula; take-out food; lid; set the table

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*(continued)*

### **Example D: Writing a Letter to a Movie Character-(Mrs. Doubtfire)**

#### **A Letter to Miranda, From A friend.**

Dear Miranda,

I just heard that you and Daniel are getting a divorce. How sad! You were married for so many years, and you have three such beautiful children. I know you have been angry with Daniel for a long time, especially since that terrible birthday party where he invited all those animals! But don't you think you could give him another chance? He's really a good man, so kind and so funny. . . (continued)

After you finish reading the letter to Miranda, return it to your teacher, and write your own letter, to Daniel. Tell him what you think about his divorce and his lifestyle.

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