
Movie Reviews :

The Student as Movie Critic

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I. Why use movie videos?

With the widespread accessibility of movie videos, it is no wonder that many teachers have tried to utilize them in the English language classroom. Their use is appealing to both the teacher and the student for a variety of reasons. At the most basic level, students see movies as a fun, enjoyable method of practicing their English skills. Movie videos offer the students an alternative to more traditional and perhaps less interesting methods of learning English. Since watching movie videos is enjoyed by native English speakers, the students have a sense that they are doing a real-life activity as opposed to a typical classroom activity which merely simulates real-life situations. If they can understand a movie without reading subtitles, they will feel they have reached a high level of English proficiency.

For the teacher, a movie creates visual images that do more than engage the students' attention—they also provide a context in which the student can place different registers and their appropriateness in a variety

of situations. Movies also teach about the history, customs, and traditions of English speaking countries and, depending on the movie, they can model natural and authentic English speech patterns—something that is hard to find on the tapes of many English language textbooks. But for the teacher, the most obvious reason for using movie videos in the classroom is motivation. If the teacher uses a method that motivates students, then he/she can accomplish a great deal in helping students reach their goals.

II. How can movie videos be used in the classroom?

Watching videos could be described as an essentially passive activity. So the question facing the teacher is this: “How can watching a video be made into something active and interactive?” There are, of course, many good answers to this question. For example, students can listen to short segments of a movie and then discuss vocabulary words, idioms, themes and issues, etc. Students can act out parts of a movie or even rewrite the scenes inventing their own story lines.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a specific method in which the student plays the part of a movie critic. As a movie critic, the student will summarize and review a movie, and then lead the class in discussion of the themes in the movie.

III. Background and goals

During my first year at Kanagawa University, I was assigned a third and fourth year elective English class. Because the class was elective, the students tended to be rather motivated and with some overseas experi-

ence. This advanced class seemed to be ideal for using movies as the “textbook”. We watched short sections of a movie, studied vocabulary and idioms and then spent a good deal of time discussing the issues and themes of the movie using prepared discussion questions. One of the most important purposes was to provide a format by which students could express their ideas. (For a complete description of this class procedure please see “Movie Videos: Developing Discussion and Listening Skills for Advance Students of English” by J. Rex Armstrong, published in *International Management Review*, pages 101-110, July, 1997.)

At the end of the year, the students were asked to write an evaluation of the class. The positive remarks from the students clearly indicated that the students not only enjoyed this method of learning English, but that they also found it to be beneficial to their overall English proficiency. A few students wrote some constructive ideas that I felt deserved special consideration on my part. One student remarked that she would like to present her group’s ideas to the class after the discussion time was over. In other words, some kind of an informal presentation. Another student remarked that he would like to spend more time talking with the teacher on a one-to-one basis. With these suggestions in mind, I considered how the basic format of the method could be changed for future classes to allow for a class presentation and for more personal contact with the teacher.

In the end, I decided that the established format worked quite well. It would be better to supplement the basic plan rather than to change it drastically. Also, the lesson plan for each section of the movie already required students to do quite a bit of work on the themes of the movie. Belaboring those points may prove wearisome for the students. I thought

it might be best to somehow use other movies for the sake of variety.

I decided to design a project that would place each student in the position of “movie critic”. This would allow the class to keep its movie-orientated basis while allowing students to have a break from the regular classroom movie. It would also allow students the opportunity to develop the skill of discussing a movie they had recently seen—a common real-life activity. The idea of having students watch a movie together (the movie on which the lesson plans were built around) and on their own (a separate movie for which they would critique) was appealing to me.

The basic plan was to have each student watch a movie video on his/her own time, present a short review of the plot, critique the movie, show a short clip to the class, and finally, write discussion questions based on one of the movie’s themes for the students to discuss in small groups. The procedures are outlined as follows:

- A. Purchase appropriate movie videos
- B. Class period #1: Introduce the project
- C. Class period #2: Model the presentation
- D. Class period #3 Discuss presentation techniques
- E. The teacher-student conference
- F. The day of the presentation
- G. Student and teacher evaluations

IV. Procedures

A. Purchase appropriate movie videos

The first step was to buy enough movie videos for the students to watch. Using research money, I purchased 25 videos for the 22 students in

the class. These videos were purchased in the United States because I knew they would not have subtitles and in general, they would be relatively inexpensive. By purchasing the videos overseas, I could also obtain a few movies that had not been distributed in Japan. Some students found this appealing. Before I started buying the videos, I made a list of movie categories in order to make sure there would be a wide variety of movie genres for students to choose from. The categories were as follows: drama, comedy, documentary, mystery, fantasy. Other categories, such as western, action, and horror films were left off my list since each of these categories presented some problems in my opinion. However, other teachers might find them perfectly workable.

The types of movies that seemed to work best were those dealing with complicated issues of relationships. Peeling off the layers of meaning with students during their teacher conference was a positive language experience. Surprisingly, a variety of themes found in movies within the same genre, were not that difficult to find. For example, a good number of dramas deal with the theme, “finding your dream” and “finding true love”, but there were usually enough strong subplots to exploit for the discussion section of the project.

B. Class period # 1: Introduce the project

Since the project had several sections to it and was rather complicated, I felt it was necessary to introduce the project goals and requirements on one day and then model the presentation for the class on another. During the first class period, students received the following handout outlining the project and its goals:

Movie Review Presentation

Project Description: You will watch a movie and give a presentation on it before the class.

Project Procedure and Requirements:

1. Watch a movie and write a movie profile. (Description of the profile is on the handout entitled "Movie Profile".)
2. Meet with the teacher for a conference before your presentation. (We will discuss your written profile as well as any other matter regarding your presentation.)
3. Rewrite your written profile making corrections mentioned in the conference.
4. Practice your presentation.
5. Give a presentation to the class (10-20 minutes). Your presentation should include all the information on your movie profile. You will hand in your finished written profile to the teacher on the day of your presentation.
6. Show a video clip from the movie you watched and lead the class in discussion of one of the issues presented in the movie (10-20 minutes).

Presentation Date: Read the Movie Presentation Schedule to see when you are to present your movie review. Students who wish to change or postpone their presentation date must let the teacher know at least 10 days in advance.

Evaluation: The teacher will evaluate your presentation based on the following:

1. Did the student show up on time for his/her conference with the teacher and was the student prepared for the conference?
2. Was the written movie profile easy to read, well-written, done according to instructions, and turned in on time?
3. Was the movie presentation easy to understand and done according the speech principles discussed in class (use of speech notes,

- gestures, posture, eye contact, etc.)?
4. Was the movie clip shown to the class appropriate/interesting?

Students also receive a description of a movie profile:

Movie Profile Outline

At the time of your presentation, you must turn in a written movie profile. This profile should be written neatly or typed and given to the teacher.

1. Name of the movie.
2. Movie Genre:
3. Actors
4. Rating: 5 stars = excellent, 4 stars = very good, 3 stars = good, 2 stars = fair, 1 star = a turkey!)
5. A brief summary of the movie's plot.
6. Write a review/recommendation for this movie (this might include the movie's strengths/weaknesses, the parts you liked/disliked, main themes or lessons learned from the movie, the actors' abilities, artistic design, character development, etc.).

After you show a brief clip from your movie, give your classmates a list of discussion questions they can discuss.

C. Class period # 2: Model the presentation

During the second class period, we reviewed the goals and procedures of the project. After fielding questions, I gave a demonstration presentation for the movie "Death Becomes Her" starring Bruce Willis, Meryl

Streep, and Goldie Hawn. The presentation proceeded according to the project goals listed above. (i.e. a review of the plot, a critique of the movie, a video clip and discussion questions regarding the themes of the movie.)

After students have discussed the discussion questions for 10-20 minutes, I remind them that this is what they will need to do for the spoken part of the project. There is, however, a written part as well. This part must be turned in to the teacher on the day of the presentation. It parallels the spoken part fairly closely and is meant to give the student a solid amount of content for his/her spoken presentation. The written model given to the students is as follows:

Movie Profile

(example of written part of the project)

Movie: *Death Becomes Her*

Movie Genre: Comedy

Actors: Starring Meryl Streep, Goldie Hawn and Bruce Willis and co-starring Isabella Rossellini.

Rating: ☆☆

Themes: eternal life, greed, death, beauty, selfishness

Summary: This movie is about a movie and theater star named Madeline Ashton (Meryl Streep) who is growing older and finding it difficult to find good roles. Not only is she worried about her wrinkles and her fading career, but she is also conceited, vain, and undeniably selfish. One of her so-called friends, Helen Sharp (Goldie Hawn), has long known that

Madeline has all but destroyed her life by treating her poorly and often taking away her boyfriends. When Helen, who was never as famous or as glamorous as Madeline, tried to find happiness in life, Madeline was sure to crush it. Helen decides to introduce her fiancé Ernest (Bruce Willis) who is a famous plastic surgeon, to Madeline. Of course, Madeline steals him away from Helen and Madeline even marries him!

Helen decides to get even by taking a potion from a mysterious enchantress (Isabella Rossellini) that will give her eternal youth. Unknown to Helen, Madeline also takes the potion and that's when the fun begins because the potion has some negative side effects. For example, if you are shot or fall off a building, you can't die, but your body will be in terrible shape and you'll look awful. So is living forever really that wonderful?!?!

In order to keep their broken bodies in good shape, they need Ernest and his plastic surgeon's skills. They try to get Ernest to take the potion so he will live forever and be their plastic surgeon for eternity. Ernest, however, has no desire to live forever - especially with those two demanding, selfish women.

Will Ernest take the potion? Is death better than eternal life?

Review: This is a dark comedy with a few good laughs, but one could hardly call this a great comedy. It's always a pleasure to see Streep and I'm glad to see her do comedy. Hawn and Willis are also quite good in this movie.

The major theme in this movie seems to be that death isn't all that bad, and if we really got what we wanted (presumably, eternal life), we wouldn't really like it that much. This issue, however, is dealt with only lightly and the viewer can't really get much out of it.

The big reason to see this film is the special effects. They are remarkable! Streep's head turns completely around, Hawn walks around with a huge hole in her stomach! We even see them tumble down stairs and break into a thousand pieces, but still able to talk and complain about the situation.

I would recommend this movie for an evening of light entertainment, but

nothing more.

The discussion questions (which they have already discussed during the model) are as follows:

Death Becomes Her

Discussion questions

1. Why do people have plastic surgeons change their faces? What kinds of cosmetic surgery have you heard of?
2. As you grow older, do you think you'll be vain about your looks? Will wrinkles and sagging body parts bother you?
3. Do you think plastic surgery is a good idea? In the future, would you ever have it done?
4. If you could alter yourself through surgery next week, what would you change?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of having cosmetic surgery?

Before the class is dismissed, I pass out a Movie Review Schedule which shows which day each student will be presenting his/her presentation. I ask the first five students on the presentation list to come up and check out a movie they would like to review. I tell the rest of the class that they can come to my office and choose a movie whenever they have time. Many choose to wait until their presentation date is near.

D. Class Period # 3: Discuss presentation techniques

Students have had a wide variety of public speaking experiences even in their native language. It is safe to assume that a number of them have never given a speech in English. Although the class I taught was not a

speech class, I knew that some instruction in presentation techniques would be necessary for the project to be a pleasant and successful endeavor.

Using several sources, I presented the students with some basic information regarding speech techniques. Of course, there are whole textbooks written on speech techniques and it isn't possible to cover every detail in this article. In brief, the main points I present to the students are as follows: eye contact, voice inflection, gestures, and posture. As a class, we practice these skills in short activities.

Finally, I discuss speech notes and how they differ from the written section of the project. I make copies of the speech notes I used in the last class period's model and demonstrate how they work and why they make for a more effective presentation.

E. The teacher-student conference

After presenting the project, information, modeling a presentation, and discussing speech techniques over three separate class periods, I wait for two weeks before starting the presentations. Students must come in to see me at least one week before their presentation. I have found it beneficial to give them the following handout so we can have an effective use of our time:

Your Teacher Conference Movie Review Presentation

When is my conference?

You need to make an appointment with the teacher some time during the week before you give your presentation.

What do I need to bring to the conference?

You need to bring the following items:

1. A draft of your Movie Profile (summary and review)
2. A draft of your discussion questions
3. An idea about which video clip you want to use

What will we do during the conference?

We will talk about the movie, correct and improve your Movie Profile, look over your discussion questions and discuss any other questions you might have.

What do I do after the conference?

You must rewrite your Movie Profile and practice your speech at home. The teacher will bring copies of the discussion questions for your classmates.

What do I need to do/bring to class on the day of my presentation?

- 1) Turn in your rewritten Movie Profile to the teacher.
- 2) Bring your video cued up and ready to play.
- 3) Be prepared!! Don't forget to bring your video and to use speech notes.

The purposes of the conference are as follows:

1) To make certain the student understood the movie

Students can usually get the general gist of a movie, but sometimes they miss the finer, yet important points. I ask them many "why?" questions: Why didn't the woman leave her husband? Why did the man tell a lie to the police? etc. Affective questions are also useful: How did you feel about the old man? What does this movie tell you about the "American Dream"? Is this a typical problem in Japan, too? Getting students to articulate these ideas not only prepares them for a more interesting presentation, but it also develops their critical thinking skills.

2) To correct and improve the written part of the project

After discussing the movie, we read through the written part of the assignment together. Student needs vary greatly, but in general, we discuss important points that have been omitted or are confusing. Because students sometimes have a hard time realizing that their classmates have not seen the movie, they leave out vital background information or they write the background information in a disorderly manner. And, of course, this is also an opportune time to discuss grammar. Whatever the problems are, the point of this step is to give the student a personal, one-on-one evaluation of his/her written assignment. Students greatly benefit from and appreciate this kind of attention.

3) To review and change their discussion questions

Students had an idea of what this entailed because every class period involved several sets of discussion questions revolving around the movie we watched as a class. In addition, the teacher model also provided an example of discussion questions. Still, it became obvious from the beginning that students found this a difficult task. Clearly, the students had to come up with ideas for their questions and then improve their grammar, but they also had to focus on writing questions that would get their classmates to speak about the themes that were most important to the movie. Students discovered that by re-wording their questions, they could expect different kinds of answers. As an example, the questions below represent a student's first try at writing discussion questions based on the themes from the movie *The Trip To Bountiful*:

- 1) Do you have a hometown? If you have hometown, what do you think and remember hometown?
- 2) Are your grandpa or grandma friendly with your parents?

- 3) Have you ever wanted to go alone trip? If you said yes when or why?
- 4) Do you like a trip? How trip?
- 5) Do you have a dream that you wanted to before you dies?

The first part of the first question is a “yes/no” question, which is fine if followed by a follow-up question. But in this case, I asked the student if there were many students who didn’t have a hometown. He agreed that the question probably wasn’t necessary. The second part of the question was vague. Whenever this occurs, I ask the student to answer it himself/herself. Often, they struggle because it is vague for them, too! We make the appropriate changes.

The second question is also a “yes/no” question and the word “friendly” is a bit general. So, I asked the student what he meant by “friendly”. Many in-law relationships may be friendly, but the student really wanted to know what kinds of disagreements exist in his classmates’ families. It is typical for a student to write a question that doesn’t quite focus on what he/she truly wants discussed.

Questions three, four, and five all have grammar and word usage problems with them as well as problems similar to those in questions one and two. In the end, the questions looked like this:

- 1) What do you like the best about your hometown? the least? Do you want to live there in the future? Why?
- 2) What kind of thing do your parents argue about? What kinds of disagreements do they have with their parents? In your family, who is the easiest to get along with? the most difficult?
- 3) What are the advantages in traveling alone? any disadvantages? Describe a time when you traveled by yourself?

- 4) Describe one place you would like to visit before you die.
- 5) What is one thing you hope to accomplish before you die?

After the final draft of the questions has been decided upon, I put them on the computer, give the student a copy, and tell him/her that I will bring enough copies for all the students on the day of the presentation.

4) To discuss their choice of video clip

The student is then asked which five to eight minute video clip he/she has chosen to show the class. During the actual presentation, the video clip is shown before the class breaks into groups to discuss the discussion questions, but I generally talk about the video clip selection after we work on the discussion questions. The reason for this is that the conference in general and the discussion question improvements specifically, help focus students on what they should show the rest of the class on the video. In other words, the video clip should relate to the movie's themes and the discussion questions.

Students do a fairly good job when it comes to choosing an appropriate video clip, but sometimes they choose a clip that is too complicated or too dialog based. The class, which has not seen the movie, will not have enough background to understand what is happening. In these cases, I ask them to choose another clip.

It is important to discuss the biggest problems students have with the video clip. Students often finish the spoken part of their presentation and then go directly to the clip without giving any set-up whatsoever. The class will view a clip without knowing who the people in it are or what the setting is. Explaining and practicing this in the conference is another learning experience for the student.

5) To review the student's responsibilities on the day on the presentation

Finally, I remind the student what he/she needs to do before the presentation. First, the student needs to rewrite his/her written portion of the project and turn that in to the teacher on the day of the presentation. Second, students need to practice the presentation. They are encouraged to use a tape recorder and/or a mirror. They are reminded to review the principles of presentation covered in class (eye contact, gestures, etc.).

F. The day of the presentation

Because of the conference and careful planning, the student should have confidence in himself/herself by the time the presentation date arrives. On the day of the presentation, the procedure goes as follows:

- 1) The student turns in the written portion of his/her presentation (I do this before the speech because some students have tried to read their presentation rather than use speech notes.)
- 2) The student gives the presentation: a summary and then a review. (10-15 minutes)
- 3) The video clip is setup and then shown. (5-8 minutes)
- 4) The class splits into small groups to discuss the discussion questions. (15-20 minutes)

G. Student and teacher evaluations

Many teachers have experience in evaluation speeches and may, therefore, have their own methods they feel comfortable with. I sit with the audience during the presentation and take notes which I will later add to their evaluation sheet. In addition, I use a simple check-off sheet based on the following points:

- 1) Was the student on time and prepared for the conference with

the teacher?

- 2) Was the written movie profile easy to read, well-written, and done according to instructions?
- 3) Was the presentation easy to understand, were speech notes, gestures, posture, etc. used appropriately?
- 4) Was the movie clip appropriate?

V. Conclusion

This project successfully met the goals of the class. 1) Although more formal than I had originally planned, the presentation gave students the opportunity to present their ideas before the class. 2) Students were also given the opportunity to meet with the teacher on a one-to-one basis to discuss the project. The conference had benefits far beyond the goals of the presentation itself. They gave the students a context in which they felt comfortable coming to my office and talking with me in English. 3) Finally, the project added an interesting and positive supplement to the regular class lesson plan. The students had an active, positive, and motivating language experience.