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Film Analysis in the Language Classroom

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外国語の授業における映画分析について

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Introduction

The use of films in an English language learning classroom can help teachers create an experience for their students that can be motivating, as well as entertaining. Through the process of selecting appropriate films, setting up optimal viewing conditions, and creating meaningful classroom activities, teachers can provide many learning opportunities for their students, so they can reach new levels in their language abilities. Beyond these gains, film analysis can encourage students to further develop their creativity and expand their understanding of other cultures while reflecting on their own.

The Benefits of Film

Films can provide students with many authentic listening experiences, making costly overseas travel less significant for language learning. Students can take notice of the pronunciation and intonation of native speakers within the film, and it can expose them to unfamiliar grammatical structures and vocabulary words commonly used in real-life situations (Gebhard, 2009). Additionally, non-verbal communication can be conveyed in these on-screen interactions, such as the use of eye contact, gestures, and proxemics. Students living in a homogenous culture have fewer opportunities to interact with people from other cultures, which can weaken their *cultural competence*. However, through the analysis of artwork, such as films, students can become more familiar with the social and cultural norms of other countries, such as turn-taking in a conversation or giving a gratuity for a provided service (Parisi & Andon, 2016; Wolpert-Gawron, 2015). Film clips can also educate students about the societal issues of other cultures, which can include gender inequality or racial discrimination. Although books and newspaper articles are also informative, the visual storytelling of films can effectively convey a considerable amount of information in a short period of time (Parisi & Andon, 2016). Through this gained awareness in language and culture, students can learn to appreciate the diverse experiences and struggles of others, allowing them to reflect and draw comparisons to their own culture (Mutta et al., 2018; Vernier et al., 2008).

Selecting Films

To ensure a film's effectiveness for language learning in the classroom, teachers must be mindful during the film selection process. According to Parisi and Andon (2016), the course goals, the needs and wants of the students, and the amount of enjoyment the film brings are necessary in determining its appropriateness. Films that will raise the students' *intercultural awareness* should also be chosen when possible, helping them to gain a greater understanding of other cultures, as well as their own, through the recognition of their similarities and differences. Furthermore, films can provide opportunities to debate social issues that exist within these cultures and learn about historical events that have taken place (Chan & Herrero, n.d.). The film's *dialog, aesthetics*, and *format* are other important considerations, which tend to be overlooked by teachers when selecting a film, so I will now discuss them in greater detail.

Dialog

Films with dialog that is delivered clearly at a comprehensible speed should take preference, while period language that contains dated or overly formal dialog should be avoided. Additionally, speech with thick regional dialects or slang could be problematic for students and overlapping speech among the performers can also create confusion, especially if it is not visually supported with the actors' on-screen action (Chan & Herrero, n.d.). Films based on plays tend to be dialog-heavy and lack the context of actions and multiple settings, so they are often unsuitable for students. Furthermore, speech with complex grammar and challenging vocabulary should be a concern for teachers with lower level language students. If the linguistic demands of the film are too great, it can be a demotivating experience for them (Parisi & Andon, 2016).

Film Aesthetics

Filmmakers utilize a variety of cinematic techniques to support their storytelling. Different camera angles and movements can convey a certain mood to the viewers. For example, a low angle shot of a character can give the impression of power or status, and a handheld shot can heighten the energy of an action sequence. The coverage of a scene can further support the narrative, such as the use of a wide shot to provide an overview of the scene's setting or a close-up shot of a character's face to emphasize an inner conflict (Donagy, 2014; Lehde, 2019). Additionally, slow-motion shots are often used to highlight an emotion or an action. Soft, diffused lighting can enhance the beauty of a character or setting, while deep shadows from hard lighting can create a more unattractive appearance or disturbing atmosphere. Additionally, the color palette in the lighting, set design, and wardrobe can be vibrant or muted, depending on the type of story being told by the filmmaker. The rhythm of the editing can also shape the story; calmer moments tend to have fewer cuts, while action sequences have many consecutive shots with shorter duration times. The sound effects and score are added during this post-production process to further support the mood of the film and engage the viewers (Ahn, 2020; Lehde, 2019).

Showing films with strong aesthetics can help students construct meaning visually, even though they may have some difficulty following the spoken dialog. Furthermore, students with knowledge

of these film production techniques can more deeply analyze the film. In the *Digital Research Skills* (DRS) video production course at *Hiroshima Bunkyo University* (HBU), I play film clips from some of the most accomplished directors that display a range of production techniques, followed by classroom discussions on the desired effect of these techniques on the narrative. These viewings and discussions include the coverage and tracking shots of Stanley Kubrick, the close-up and slow-motion shots of Brian De Palma, and the sound and picture edits of Alfred Hitchcock. With an understanding of this visual grammar, the DRS students try to emulate these techniques when producing their own narrative short films. Each student produces three films in the DRS course, allowing them to demonstrate their visual literacy and language proficiency through their produced films, written project reports, and voiced opinions.

Format

When selecting a narrative film, teachers must also consider the strengths and weaknesses of the two available formats: feature-length film and short film. A feature-length film typically has a running time between 90 and 120 minutes, and they are widely accessible through online streaming media services, video rental stores, and movie theaters. A great number of English-language, feature-length films are professionally produced in the U.S. each year by Hollywood film studios and independent production companies. A wide range of film genres are available in the feature-length format, so films can be precisely selected by teachers for their cultural and historical significance, as well as their entertainment value. These films are often produced with large budgets, resulting in high production values, allowing students to further discuss the technical aspects of the film that were used to support the storytelling. Additionally, watching a feature-length film in its entirety and having the ability to follow the details of the plot as it unfolds can be a rewarding experience for students.

Despite these strengths, showing a feature-length film has its limitations. The film's long duration requires considerable preparation time for the teacher to become familiar with the film's many linguistic, cultural, and cinematic aspects while considering how well these aspects will be received by their students (Donagy, 2014). Furthermore, the long running time makes it difficult for teachers to play the film during a lesson and may require multiple lessons to complete. Repeated viewings are logistically difficult for teachers to carry out, so students have fewer opportunities to give a detailed analysis. Although the students can watch the film outside of the class time, teachers will not be able to monitor comprehension and interest level, so feature-length films tend to be more suitable for students with higher level language proficiency. Logistically speaking, it can also be difficult for teachers to secure enough copies of the film for each student in the course. Alternatively, teachers can play an isolated scene or a series of interconnected scenes from a feature-length film during a lesson. By skipping over a film's subplot or scenes with secondary characters, the teacher can better manage their class time while still conveying the main ideas outlined by the filmmaker.

In contrast to feature-length films, short films have opposing advantages and disadvantages that must also be taken into consideration. As defined by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and

Sciences, the running time of a short film is 40 minutes or less ("91st Academy Awards," n.d.), which can include films that are less than a single minute in length. The obvious strength of this format is the flexibility it provides teachers in screening a complete narrative story in a short amount of time (Chan & Herrero, n.d.). Repeated viewings of the short film are more manageable during a lesson, allowing students to take part in a deeper analysis of the film's narrative and aesthetics while being monitored by the teacher. Short films tend to have more simplistic storylines with fewer characters, making it easy for the students to follow. In other words, short films can be the most beneficial to students with lower level language proficiency or limited visual literacy. However, short films do present several limitations to the teachers. The market for short films is considerably smaller, so they are mostly produced by student or amateur filmmakers. As a result, it is more challenging to locate a short film that emphasizes a particular linguistic, cultural, or historical aspect while demonstrating skilled production techniques (Chan & Herrero, n.d.).

Ways of Analyzing

Having carefully selected a feature-length film, film scene, or short film, teachers can help students analyze the film in three successive stages with opportunities for them to utilize all four language learning skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These three stages are pre-viewing activities, viewing activities, and post-viewing activities. Prior to the film's in-class viewing, teachers must identify any challenging vocabulary in the film's dialog and provide translations to them or have the students match the words with their definitions, especially if the understanding of these words are crucial to the film's plot or character development. Furthermore, words to help students express their observations and opinions on the filmmaker's process should be introduced prior to the viewing ("Teaching Guide," n.d.). For example, before the *Pop Culture* (PC) students at HBU analyze a short film at the *Bunkyo English Communication Center* (BECC), they practice using the words "portray" and "portrayal" when looking at several photographs of the same subject matter taken from different photographers. The varied artistic choices of each photographer are obvious in their portrayals in terms of camera placement, use of color, lens choice, time of day, wardrobe, and displayed emotion. These different choices result in a range of reactions from the students, as they learn to identify and express their opinions about the artwork and the emotions they evoke.

1. Pre-Viewing Activities

Before playing the film in its entirety, teachers can introduce several pre-viewing activities to generate interest about the story and encourage lively discussions among the students. Teachers can play a portion of the film's audio without the visuals, so the students can make a list of all the sounds that they hear. This list can contain diegetic sounds, such as dialog and sound effects, as well non-diegetic sounds, which can be the film's narration or musical score. From this list of sounds, students can try to determine meaning, including the film's actions, plot, and genre. Alternatively, teachers can simply present students with the film's title or the film's poster and ask them to make similar predictions ("General Film Activities," n.d.). Students can also view a portion

of the film without any audio and try to construct meaning by observing the film's setting and the actors' body language and wardrobe. They can use these visual clues to speculate on the story and the relationship of the actors (Gebhard, 2009). In a variation of this activity, the classroom can be divided into listeners and viewers of the film, so the students can later work together in pairs or small groups to share their observations, negotiate meaning, and construct a deeper understanding of the film's storyline. Additionally, teachers can show students the beginning of a selected scene and have them predict what will happen next in the narrative or, conversely, the end of the scene can be shown, so the students can surmise the events that have led up to it. Ideally, teachers should pause the film just before a plot twist is revealed. This gives the students an opportunity to express their creativity, as various interpretations of the film's events are constructed among them based on the film's visual and auditory clues, which may be further influenced by their own life experiences. After the students share and discuss their ideas, the remaining half of the scene is viewed as a whole class. Students often take interest during this stage of the activity, as the similarities and differences between their ideas and the filmmaker's ideas are revealed.

2．Viewing Activities

During the viewing of the film, it is important for the students to maintain their focus from beginning to end, so they can fully participate in the film analysis activities. Teachers can introduce comprehension questions to help the students stay engaged. These questions should be shared after the film has been paused; otherwise, the students may have difficulty watching and answering at the same time. Instead of waiting until the end of the film, teachers can periodically pause the film and introduce a new set of questions to the students as the film's narrative progresses and the plot unfolds. Without these pauses, they may passively watch the film and overlook the language used by the characters or critical details in the story, resulting in disinterest or confusion (Andersson & Bjornsson, 2019). Although it may still be an entertaining experience for them without these breaks, it may have few educational benefits. Depending on the course and the background knowledge of the students, the comprehension questions can focus on the film's verbal and non-verbal communication, the cultural and historical events, the plot, or the technical aspects of the film's production. Teachers can also continue the pre-viewing activities if they choose, such as pausing the film at a critical moment in the narrative and asking students to predict an outcome. Students can become frustrated from frequent pauses in the viewing and overwhelmed by too many viewing activities, so teacher should try to find an appropriate balance (Parisi & Andon, 2016). Additionally, teachers should observe their students as they view the film to get a sense of their mood and interest level (Alurri, 2018). This informal observation could inform them of the film's suitability and the effectiveness of any repeated viewings. Finally, students can benefit from rewatching scenes that were first introduced in the pre-viewing activities. Not only will they have a greater understanding of the film's narrative, but the additional viewing will lead to greater vocabulary retention (Ashcroft et al., 2018).

During the screening of the film, teachers should enable the captions, so students can read the dialog as it is spoken, helping them to maintain their comprehension and expand their vocabulary

(Alurri, 2018). To further aid this process, teachers can share word lists and gap fill worksheets for selected scenes. Unlike captions, teachers should avoid subtitles because they provide translations of the spoken dialog, making it less effective for language learning.

3. Post-Viewing Activities

After watching the film, the post-viewing activities can provide students with many opportunities to express their thoughts and opinions about what has been viewed, while the more ambiguous aspects of the narrative can be debated. These discussions are not for constructing a consensus on meaning; rather, it is a chance for multiple interpretations and points of view to be shared, which may be informed from the diverse life experiences the students bring to the classroom (Blasco et al., 2015). Students can also share the thematic and technical aspects of the film that they found agreeable or disagreeable, such as the film's plot, characters, message, camera shots, scene length, and so on (McDermott et al., 2018; Wolpert-Gawron, 2015). Furthermore, the linguistic, cultural, and historical aspects of the film can be discussed. Teachers can also prompt their students to reflect on what they have viewed and how it may or may not relate to their own personal experiences and culture (Parisi & Andon, 2016).

The ideas shared in these discussions can provide students with a starting point for various writing activities (Wolpert-Gawron, 2015). Teachers can ask their students to summarize the story, describe the characters, or use their imagination to create backstories or sequels. Formal writing from these ideas can also take place in the form of a film review or an analytical essay. A film review is journalistic form of writing that often includes a brief synopsis of the plot, the narrative's main conflict, and the character development. The ending of the film is not revealed in the review, while memorable aspects of the production can be referenced, such as the cinematography, performances, and editing (Bordwell, 2001). If the reviewer is familiar with film's genre or director, comparisons to other films can be discussed. In contrast to the film review, an analytical essay is an argumentative piece that highlights the writer's subjective opinions about the filmmaker's creative decisions, such as the use of symbolism or motifs to reinforce the film's thematic elements. Considering that an analytic essay requires a solid foundation in visual literacy and language skills, teachers should first introduce a film review for the formal writing assignment.

If students have access to a tablet or smartphone, they can select a scene they found enjoyable and replace the speech of the actors with their own voices using a free video editing application, such as iMovie. Beyond learning the words and grammar spoken in the film, students can emulate the pronunciation and intonation for dramatic effect. Alternatively, students can deviate from the script and rewrite the dialog as they desire, or they can delete both the audio and video and completely recreate the scene with their classmates (Donagy, 2014). Non-verbal communications, such as gestures and proxemics, could be an added element for students to include in their videos. If technology limitations arise or time is limited, students can simply perform their reimagined scripts in front of their classmates.

Analyzing films in the BECC's *Pop Culture* course

In the BECC's *Pop Culture* elective course at HBU, the third and fourth year Global Communication Department students analyze and critique popular culture in English-speaking countries, as well as in Japan; this can include topics related to fashion, sports, advertising, technology, current events, and artwork, including films. As stated in the course outline, the students are expected to share their ideas and opinions about these topics through classroom discussions. To further explain this process, I will share two film analysis examples from the first semester of this course: *The Lunch Date and Hidden Figures.*

The Lunch Date (short film)

When discussing first impressions in the *Pop Culture* course, I first provide some background information on the history of New York City's Grand Central Terminal and the extensive use of this iconic train station as a setting in films. The students and I briefly view a few film scenes that take place in the station and discuss them, including Darnell and McGrath's *Madagascar*, John Frankenheimer's *Seconds* and Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*. Next, I show my students the first half of the 1989 short film, *The Lunch Date*, by director Adam Davidson. With a short running time of 12 minutes and visually supported dialog, the content of the film is easily understood by all students. To further ensure comprehension, I engage the English captions, even though the dialog is sparse. In the first-half of this film, a formally dressed woman orders a salad at a café inside of Grand Central Terminal after missing her train. Based on her wardrobe and demeanor, the woman appears to be wealthy. Not only is she is wearing a fur hat and pearl earrings, but she is also carrying several shopping bags from an upscale department store. After this woman returns to her table after gathering cutlery from a nearby counter, a younger informally dressed man appears to be eating her salad. The woman tries to retrieve the salad from the man, but he refuses. At this point, I pause the film and ask my students to characterize the man and woman, and to make a prediction about the second-half of the film. These two characters differ in race, age, gender and, seemingly, socioeconomic status, so it is possible that the students would make stereotypical judgments based on any one of these observations. After discussing the various interpretations of the characters and story by the students, I resume the second half of the film. Surprisingly, the man decides to share the salad with the woman, and they begin to eat it together. Having warmed up to her, the man also buys her a hot beverage. At the film's conclusion, it is revealed that the woman had mistakenly sat down at the wrong table, and the salad that she purchased was unattended the entire time. After the complete viewing of this short film, my students are often surprised by the generosity of the man, as well as their mischaracterization of his actions; he is not a thief as they tend to assume. After viewing the entire film, I introduce a secondary discussion among the students about the danger of making assumptions based on race, age, gender, and socioeconomic status, and the students are asked to further reflect on their own experiences and observations in Japanese culture. Furthermore, if time and interest level permits, we may also discuss several of the filmmaker's artistic decisions in the making of *The Lunch Date* and what the filmmaker is trying to convey to the viewers through these choices. This may include the use of a jazz score over black and white images, the

lead actress' elegant wardrobe and her condescending tone, or the fluid camera movements, including the effective use of a tracking shot to reveal the unattended salad as the woman paces back and forth at the film's conclusion. The importance of this camerawork in visual storytelling is recognized by film director, Paul Schrader (2018):

> A tracking shot is a moral judgment, Jean-Luc Godard once remarked, and so, for that matter, is any camera shot. Any possible shot – high angle, close-up, pan – conveys a certain attitude toward a character, a "screen" which simplifies and interprets the character. (p. 95)

For a post-viewing activity for *The Lunch Date*, I have my students write an essay about a first impression they formed about someone from their past that was later revealed to be incorrect. I ask them to identify the details of this first encounter that contributed to their judgment, such as the person's age, body language, wardrobe, or tone of voice, and how the true nature of this person was later revealed. If needed, they can reference an earlier brainstorming activity to help them organize their ideas. After completing this writing assignment, I have my students discuss their experiences in small groups while I monitor them.

Hidden Figures (feature-length film)

To further build upon the topic of inequality and raise *intercultural awareness*, I introduce the 2016 feature-length film "Hidden Figures" to the PC students later in the semester. This dramatic biographical film is based on the lives of three female African-American mathematicians (Kathrine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan) whose contributions at NASA led to three successful orbits of the Mercury-Atlas 6 around the earth in 1962. These three women were able to achieve success despite experiencing many race and gender barriers at their workplace, which often extended into their personal lives. Before the viewing of this film, I introduce the historical background of racial discrimination in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I show photographs of racially segregated bus seats, water fountains, and bathrooms, and discuss the civil rights movement. I further extend this discussion into gender inequality and show images of women protesting gender-based wage discrimination during this same period. Additionally, I display some statistical information on the wage gap that currently exists in America and many other nations, including Japan. Before the viewing, I also provide Japanese translations and supporting graphics to help students understand the meaning of "exclusion," "segregation," "integration," and "inclusion" in the context of a school or workplace. With a running time of 127 minutes, it is not feasible for me to play the film in its entirety, so I select several crucial scenes that display Katherine Johnson's unmatched contributions at NASA, even though she could not share the same bathroom or coffee pot as her many underperforming co-workers. In the previous years of this course being taught, the impact of these powerful scenes has motivated several students to seek out this DVD in the BECC's *Self Access Learning Center* (SALC), so they could view the entire film in a *Multi-Purpose Room* (MPR). As a post-viewing activity, I have my students reflect and discuss any inequalities that they are aware of in Japan based on gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, disability, and socioeconomic status. To help guide them through this process, I project several PowerPoint slides with example language and different discussion topics while I monitor their interactions. Current events from the news combined with their individual

experiences are often referenced during this time, creating many informative classroom discussions. As a final activity, we view and discuss several appearances of an elderly Katherine Johnson in popular culture, including her appearance at the 2017 Academy Awards ceremony and, more importantly, her acceptance of the Presidential Medal of Freedom award, presented to her at the age of 97 by President Barak Obama in 2015. Considering that Katherine Johnson received this honor from the first African-American president of the United States, I have my student consider how profound this moment must have been for her.

Closing Thoughts

The short film, *The Lunch Date*, and the selected scenes from the feature-length film, *Hidden Figures*, are just two brief examples of how films can be effectively used in a language learning classroom. In my observations, film analysis in my Pop Culture course has increased my students' participation in classroom discussions, allowing them to make great improvements in their English language abilities. Through this process, their curiosity about the film's narrative is undeniable as they work together to construct meaning about the unfolding events in the storyline. Additionally, film analysis can expose the students to the societal issues of other cultures and give them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences with these issues within their own culture. Through their gained intercultural awareness, they will be better prepared to communicate and work with others regardless of any cultural differences.

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