Teaching Communication through the Use of Films

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to show that a series of short segments taken from one commercial film can be successfully utilized to teach oral communication. Although films are often used in language classes, mainly for their motivational effect on learners, film-based college English textbooks designed to teach oral communication are still limited, and, for most teachers, the use of films, such as in film-based dictation exercises, only plays a minor and supplementary role in the oral communication classroom. In this study, film-based teaching materials, based on a functional syllabus, were created from the film “Pretty Woman.” Important characteristics of the main activities and curriculum organizing principles are described in detail, and the results of actual implementation are discussed, based on data from lesson observations and questionnaires. The results of the learners’ evaluation of the class reveal that film-based communication significantly increased their motivation and interest in the class. Finally, the study suggests more film-based communication textbooks, especially designed for high beginners and pre-intermediate learners with low motivation to study English, should be created.

1. Introduction

The biggest challenge for the author, in teaching oral communication to learners with low motivation, was how to actively engage them in the task. The use of role-plays and other communicative tasks did not necessarily increase their motivation. They performed the tasks, as they were instructed, but no enthusiasm was felt among them.

The introduction of film-based listening tasks was really effective for learner motivation, confirming the results of a number of previous studies (e.g., Iida, 1988; Kan, 1995). Students were actively engaged in the task. Their enthusiasm, however, only lasted for the duration of the film-based task. After the task, the class returned to the same low level of motivation. Also, the author was concerned about the weak connection between this film-based listening task and the units of the conversation textbook. In fact, the author felt that the task was considered just as a fun activity during class, and thus played only a minor and supplemental role in the class.

The results of the students’ evaluation of the class provided supportive evidence of the lesson observations by the author. The majority of students supported the use of films in class, and they actually wrote that they wanted to study oral communication with film segments, instead of
conventional conversation textbooks they were using. The results of the questionnaires made the author, who was exploring how to use films to teach oral communication, fully aware of the need to create a film-based oral communication class. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate that a series of short segments taken from one commercial film can be successfully utilized in teaching oral communication.

2. Film-based College English Textbooks

The easiest choice for teachers wanting to create a film-based oral communication class would be to use a film-based English textbook. The choice, however, may not be necessarily easy. Why? Listing a total of 67 film-based college English textbooks which were available as of 2006, Kadoyama (2006) says that teachers already have a sufficient number of film-based textbooks to choose from. The problem is that the majority of them are not designed to teach oral communication.

Figure 1 below shows the breakdown of those 67 textbooks, with the majority of film-based textbooks (88%) using screenplays of films. Considering the layout and exercises, Kadoyama (2006) states that they are designed to teach reading comprehension, with few communicative tasks, and with the constraint that the use of films is supposed to play only a peripheral role in the class. Textbooks with no screenplays (12%), with their focus on cultural aspects, are also designed to teach reading comprehension.

Although a limited number of textbooks, such as Okino et al. (2003), published during the past few years, focus on listening comprehension, there is a serious shortage of film-based textbooks designed to teach oral communication.

In addition, Akimoto & Hamada (2007) say that film-based college textbooks, with their focus on linguistic aspects, tend to be too advanced for the average college student. Figure 1 above indicates that the majority of film-based college textbooks are not suitable for low-proficiency learners, many of whom have a motivational problem.

Teaching English through films is commonly associated with teaching communication. The film-based textbooks currently available, however, are still dominated by reading textbooks and do not reflect this association. Thus, in many cases, teaching materials must be produced by individual teachers.

3. The Study

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3-1. Teaching Materials

Considering the facts mentioned in the above section, the author decided to create film-based materials designed to teach oral communication to low-proficiency learners (Materials, hereafter) in this study. The Materials were intended to be used as the main speaking-listening coursebook.

In creating the Materials, the following three criteria were taken into account:
1. Materials should use short (3-5 minute-long) film segments taken from one commercial film.
2. The segments should follow the storyline, so that learners can enjoy the story.
3. They should cover the contents included in a basic conversation textbook.

As for Criterion 1, it is much easier to select appropriate film segments from various films than from only one specific film. In fact, Kobayashi (2003) reports a successful film-based listening class where short segments taken from a total of fifteen popular films, such as “Titanic” and “The Matrix” were used as the main teaching material. In this study, however, all the segments were taken from one commercial film in order to retain continuity in the course and schema building for learners. In fact, it could be a really time-consuming process to explain the film, characters, and the situation in the segment to learners in each class if the course were based on different films. Also, since the Materials were intended for use by many language teachers who are interested in using films in their classes, preparing many film DVDs for a class was considered too laborious for the average teacher.

Criterion 2 was set so that learners could follow the storyline of the film chosen without watching the entire film in class.

As for Criterion 3, a functional syllabus was adopted in this study, and segments were selected from the viewpoints of basic language functions (Blundell et al., 1982), such as “making apologies” and “making requests.” In fact, a number of conversation textbooks designed for low-proficiency learners are based on a topic or situational syllabus. Although some topics or situations, such as “shopping” and “at the station,” can be selected from one film, it is extremely difficult to gather all the segments required to create a topic or situational syllabus from only one film. The lack of film-based communication textbooks mentioned above may all come down to the fact that creating a conversation textbook using only one film is really difficult. The functional approach adopted in this study could be one solution to this problem. Language functions are described in detail in section 3-4.

Considering the fact that one semester consists of a total of fifteen classes, including the orientation and term test, twelve short segments were selected from the film “Pretty Woman” and the Materials were created based on these segments. See Appendix for a sample handout. The purpose of the course was to familiarize learners with spoken English and basic language functions through short film segments. The focus was on listening and speaking proficiency. Table 1 lists the topics dealt with in the class. As mentioned above, the Materials were arranged along the storyline of the film “Pretty Woman,” and each unit was based on common language functions.
Table 1: Topics dealt with in the class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit 1: Asking for information</th>
<th>Pretty Woman Part 1 (Ch.5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unit 2: Making requests</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 2 (Ch.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 3: Asking for and giving personal information</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 3 (Ch.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 4: Making suggestions</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 4 (Ch.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 5: Giving directions</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 5 (Ch.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 6: Giving greeting and introducing yourself</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 6 (Ch.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 7: Expressing regrets</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 7 (Ch.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 8: Making apologies</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 8 (Ch.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 9: Asking for opinions</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 9 (Ch.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 10: Giving explanations</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 10 (Ch.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 11: Expressing your gratitude</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 11 (Ch.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unit 12: Saying goodbye</td>
<td>Pretty Woman Part 12 (Ch.18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3-2. Participants

Participants in this study were 33 undergraduate students in a private university in Hiroshima. No students majored in English literature or linguistics. They took an oral communication class taught by the author. In the first semester (April-July, 2006), a basic conversation textbook was used as the main speaking-listening coursebook. Film-based listening practice was occasionally used as a supplementary exercise. In the second semester (October, 2006-January, 2007), film-based materials produced by the author were used as the main speaking-listening coursebook. At the end of each semester, a questionnaire was administered to them to evaluate their effort and interest in the class. Questions were answered on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (No, not at all) to 5 (Yes, very much). As van Lier (1988) notes, there is no single best way of doing L2 classroom evaluation. So, in addition to answering the questionnaire, the participants were given freedom to comment on the activity in any way they wished.

3-3. Teaching Procedures

After a brief warm-up, the participants were given a previewing activity called “What Would You Say?” In this activity, they were asked what they would say if they were a character in the film. Showing one scene (still image) contained in the film segment, as in Figure 2 below, the instructor explained the situation, and they wrote their own answers on their worksheets and some of them presented their answers to the class. The instructor then wrote these answers on the blackboard. For example, in Unit 9 where language function in focus was asking for an opinion, the participants were shown Figure 2 and they were asked what they would say to their boyfriends if they were the female character in the film,
who was dressed up for a date and would like to know how he feels about her dress.

After this previewing activity, they watched a short film segment with no subtitles. After watching the segment, they were instructed to answer “Viewing Questions,” which were intended to help them develop a range of listening skills, including a global listening, identifying specific information and making inferences. They were encouraged to support their answers by giving reasons for their answers, whenever possible.

In the next step, “Listening for the Detail,” they filled in cloze blanks in the dialog, while listening to the audio track of the segment. Then, they watched the segment again with English subtitles and checked their answers. The segment was shown once again with the Japanese soundtrack to ensure that they understood the conversation.

As post-viewing activities, two exercises were given to the participants. First, they practiced the dialog used in the viewing activity individually and with their partner. Pronunciation practice was integrated into this activity. Second, key functional expressions were reviewed based on the answers produced by the participants in the previewing activity. Additional useful expressions were also introduced and explained in detail. Thus, in this approach, the previewing activity is designed to work in two ways: increasing learners’ interest in the viewing activity and also providing sample expressions for language function study. They were instructed to create a short dialog with their partner, using the expressions in focus as an extension task. The whole class procedures are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Class Procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-viewing Activity</th>
<th>1. What Would You Say?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A warm-up task that prepares students by previewing and activating language and ideas about common language functions. Their answers will be used in the post-viewing activity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Viewing Activity</th>
<th>2. Viewing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A short film segment is shown to students without subtitles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. **Viewing Questions**
   A meaning-oriented task based on the same input. The teacher refrains from eliciting the answers at this stage, encouraging the students to find them by themselves in the next task.

4. **Listening for the Detail**
   A partial dictation task based on the same input. It is suggested that the students listen to the audio track several times.

5. **Comprehension Check**
   The segment is shown again with English subtitles. When necessary, it may be shown with the Japanese soundtrack to ensure that all the students understand the conversation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-viewing Activity</th>
<th>6. <strong>Speaking Practice</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students practice the conversation individually and with their partner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>7. <strong>Language Focus and Extension</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An overview of the language function, based on the answers produced by the students in the previewing activity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3-4. **A Functional Approach to Film-based Materials**

This course is based on a functional syllabus, so how language functions are dealt with in the Materials is of vital importance. Twelve short segments selected from the film "Pretty Woman" are studied along the storyline, and each segment is based on a short, functional dialog that learners practice with a partner.

The key language function is shown to learners in the previewing activity. In this activity learners are given a specific scene in the film, and they are encouraged to guess what a film character would say in the segment. This activity is designed as an opportunity to activate their knowledge and to explore a functional expression appropriate in a specific situation. Therefore, guessing the actual expression used in the film dialog correctly is not the goal of this activity. Students are encouraged to realize that there is more than one appropriate expression that can be used in the scene. After watching the segment, students are taught appropriate functional expressions that are introduced in the unit, based on the answers produced by individual students.

Thus, in this approach, film segments provide only a specific situation for language function study and do not necessarily contain key expressions often covered in textbooks. For example, the segment in
the unit "Asking for opinions" does not have to contain the expression "What do you think of A?" in its dialog. In fact, in the example of Figure 2 above, the female character (Vivian) says to her boyfriend, "Do I look OK?" To put it another way, this approach is based on using the scene, not the dialog, in a film. Key expressions are often included in the dialogs of most conversation textbooks, but a different approach is necessary in using film segments as the main text, because selecting sufficient key expressions to form a functional syllabus, from a single film, is almost impossible. This difficulty of selecting key expressions from a film may explain the reason for the lack of film-based textbooks designed to teach oral communication. Therefore, the approach explored in this study, making it easier to select film segments appropriate for classroom use, may be a new realistic approach to teaching language functions with a single film.

4. Results and Discussion

Figures 3 and 4 show the results of the questionnaire administered to the participants to evaluate their effort and interest in the class at the end of each semester.

Figure 3 shows the changes between the first semester and the second semester in their participation and effort toward the class. The result of a t-test revealed a significant increase ($t=2.973$, $p<.01$). It can be assumed that the participants were more actively engaged in the tasks in the second semester, where the film-based materials were used as the main coursebook.

Figure 4 shows the changes between the first semester and the second semester in learners' interest in the class. The result of a t-test also revealed a significant increase ($t=4.238$, $p<.01$). Since both semesters were taught by the author and the basic listening and speaking tasks in the class were identical, the teaching materials seem to have
caused the significant increase in their effort and interest.

An analysis of the comments made by the participants revealed two categories of answers. In order of frequency, they were (a) interesting and stimulating and (b) useful.

A majority of participants (76%) mentioned that they were interested in learning oral communication through films. Comments from this category included statements such as:

1. I’m not good at English, but I enjoyed learning it through films very much.
2. English is difficult, but the previewing exercise helped me focus on key expressions in actual viewing.
3. Films are very motivating and good teaching materials.

Judging from these comments, the use of film-based materials as the main coursebook seemed to produce a beneficial effect on many students, significantly lowering their affective filter. In fact, it was observed by the author that they were much more actively engaged in practicing the film dialogs than the dialogs in the conversation textbook. Also, five participants (15%) wrote that they could learn a lot of useful expressions through the film.

5. Conclusion

In this study, a functional approach to creating film-based teaching materials was explored to show that a series of short segments taken from one commercial film can be successfully utilized in teaching an oral communication course. Discussing the difficulty of creating a film-based communication coursebook, this study focused on the significance and potential of taking the functional approach. Important characteristics of the main activities and curriculum organizing principles are described in detail, and the results of actual implementation are discussed, based on data from lesson observations and questionnaires. The results of the learners’ evaluation of the class revealed that a film-based communication class significantly increased their motivation and interest in the class. The functional approach explored in this study is one such effective method that needs further exploration.

The motivational effects of films are acknowledged by many language teachers, who hope to use films for low-proficiency learners, often with motivational problems. The lack of film-based textbooks designed for low-proficiency learners, however, may be one obstacle to widespread use of films in the classroom, since the selection and preparation of appropriate film segments and teaching materials do require some skills. The results of this study clearly demonstrate another approach to teaching oral communication with films and the author hopes that it will add new perspectives to creating film-based teaching materials. Given the importance of the textbook in the classroom, it is to be desired that more film-based communication textbooks, especially designed for low-proficiency learners with motivational problems, will be published so that teaching communication through films will become more prevalent among language teachers.
References


Appendix

Sample Handout

**Pretty Woman Part 9 (Ch.14)**

ヴィヴィアンと出会ったことで、仕事人間のエドワードにも変化が現れてきました。仕事を後回しにしてヴィヴィアンとデートすることにしました。

**What would you say?**

1. エドワードとのデートのために、おしゃれしたヴィヴィアン。エドワードに「（私の格好）どうかしら？」と聞いています。あなたもしヴィヴィアンだったら、こんな時何と言うでしょうか？（意見・感想を求める表現）

2. どこに行くのか尋ねるヴィヴィアンに、「それは行ってのお楽しみだよ」とお酒誌に答ええるエドワード。あなたがエドワードの立場だったら、何と答えられるでしょうか？

**Viewing** 会話を聴き、その内容に合うように（ ）内から適切なものを選びなさい。また、下線部には適切な語句を補いなさい。

1. エドワードは、ネックレスは（□特注品だ □もらった物だ □借り物だ）と言っている。

2. エドワードは、ヴィヴィアンに贈ったネックレスの価段は、_________ドルだと言っている。
3. 赤いドレスを見事に着こなしたヴィヴィアンの姿に、ホテルの従業員たちも目を見張ります。エドワードは、ヴィヴィアンに「君は美しく、しかも、(□スタイルがいい □背が高い □チャーミングだ)」と言っている。
4. 飛行機に乗って二人が向かった都市の名前は、______________である。

**Practice**

1. Listen and fill in the blanks. / 2. Translate the conversation into Japanese. / 3. Play the part with your partner.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vivian:</th>
<th>Edward:</th>
<th>Vivian:</th>
<th>Edward:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do I (1. ) OK?</td>
<td>Mm.</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mm?</td>
<td>Something is (2. ).</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maybe something in this box. I don’t want you to get too (4. ). This is only on (5. ).</td>
<td>Ooh? They really let you (6. ) this from the jewelry store?</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m a very good (7. ).</td>
<td>If you were going to buy this, how much (8. ) it cost?</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A (9. ) of a million.</td>
<td>A (9. &quot; ) of a million dollars? So, where are we going?</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a (10. ).</td>
<td>If I (11. ) to tell you later, I had a really good time (12. ).</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Vivian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td>Thank you.</td>
<td>Edward:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Language Function** (Asking for an opinion)

1. *What do you think of* this class?
2. *What is your opinion of* this product?
3. *How do you feel about* going abroad to study English?
4. *How did you find* the TV documentary?

一般に意見を聞いた場合、「どう思いますか？」という日本語に引っ張られて、how や what を使った表現が連想されることが多いが、「Do I look beautiful?”や“Did you find the movie interesting?”のように、疑問詞を使わずに言ってみるのも良い方法です。