USING FILMS TO TEACH WESTERN CULTURE IN CHINESE ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) CLASS

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Masters of Science

in

Education

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by

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2011

Abstract

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In today's ESL class, students have several difficulties to confront.   Grammar and vocabulary are two basic problems, but the hugest gap most students face is cultural differences.   To understand another culture is no an easy job.   Thanks to technical developments, many schools in China equipped classrooms with multimedia platforms. These platforms give teachers new methods of teaching culture: using films.   Each film is a production of a certain culture.   By watching a film, students may have an indistinct impression of certain parts of a culture.   The teacher then can strengthen this part in the class.   This paper's focus will be on analyzing how a movie conveys the cultural information to ESL students, and the effects of showing movies in an ESL class compared to other methods of teaching.   The paper will begin with an introduction of the significance of culture when students study language, followed by a discussion of what a teacher should do in a film-based class and how.   Last is the effect of such a class.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In today's ESL class, students have several difficulties to confront.   Grammar and vocabulary are two basic needs, but many students face gaps in learning, including cultural differences.   To understand another culture is not an easy job.   "The leading works on language teaching of the last few decades have all firmly stated that cultural understanding and cross-cultural comparisons are a necessary component of language pedagogy" (Zaid, 1999, p.44).   Thanks to the technical development, many schools in China have equipped multimedia platforms in the classrooms.   These platforms give teachers a new method of teaching culture, which is using films.   Each film is a production of a certain culture. Scholar Belgin Tanriverdi considers in his article that in the era of technology, it is obvious that the traditional methods in language learning and language teaching can be replaced with more contemporary methods and techniques (2007, p.2).   "For language learners, films have the added benefit of providing authentic language and cultural information" (Bello, 1999 p. 4).   By watching a film, students may have a distinct impression of certain part of a culture.   Then, the teacher can strengthen concepts in the class.   The focus for this paper will be an analysis of how the movie conveys the cultural information to ESL students, and effects of showing movies in an ESL class compared to other teaching methods.   First, some theoretical rules and guidelines will be reviewed.   Then, a discussion of what and how a teacher should do in a film-based class will be provided. Finally, the effect on learning will be discussed.

Statement of the Problem

The problem expressed as a question is, "How can ESL students effectively be taught about western culture through English films?"

Definition of Terms

Culture.   Culture is a term that has different meanings.   Edward Hall (1959) has defined culture and communication saying that "culture is communication and communication is culture."   The connection between culture and language has been noted as far back as the classical period and probably long before (Baepler, 2003).

ESL.   ESL is an abbreviation for the term English as a Second Language (Shufen, 2005).

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety days.   Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite, and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources.   Key search topics included "Culture," and "ESL."

Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the studies of reasons and significances of culture teaching in ESL class will be conducted.   A second review of literature relates to approaches in the class, including film choice and teaching strategies.   The findings will be summarized and recommendations made

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Cultures in Films and the Reasons We Use Film to Teach Western Culture

There are many definitions for culture.   For example, in 1952, Alfred Kroeber and

Clyde Kluckhohn compiled a list of 164 definitions of "culture" in *Culture: A Critical*

Review of Concepts and Definitions.   Robert Kolker (1999) defined culture as "the text of

our lives, the ultimately coherent pattern of beliefs, acts, response that we produce and

comprehend every day."   He also stated that the idea of culture as text means that culture

is not nature; it is made by people in history, the product of all they think and do (Kolker,

1999, p.18).   China and America have different kinds of culture, which are different in

many aspects.   Not all Chinese ESL learners can have the opportunities of visiting and

living in English-speaking countries to experience cultural differences.   The most

accountable way may be through viewing the movies of those countries.   The information

in movies is rich and vivid.   The pictures in the movie, the way characters talk, the music

in the movie, even the meaning behind all shows how people behave and think.   "The film

usually is seen as the production of popular and non-elite culture.   Daniel Bell said:

"Today's culture is becoming a visual culture" (Wang Songlin, 2003, p. 24).

The scholar Xu Jiangang (2000) has studied American movies for a long time.   He

stated that, "Film as an audio and visual arts, which display the arts through the image and

sound, is to express certain thoughts and feelings, or reflect the different social-cultural and the national spirit" (p.20).   As an integral part of the cultural life of mankind, film directed reflects a nation's culture.   For example, American movies are also an important way for the expression of American culture.   The United States has a global vision in her film culture.   This determines attitude and patterns in American films more than in other countries around the world.   Because of ethnic diversity and inclusiveness of cultural patterns, American movies continuously develop and spread worldwide.   In Xu Jiangang's view, American movies have three obvious characteristic culture patterns.   "First of all, American films have the tradition of individualism and heroism" (2000, p. 22).   For instance, in the famous American action movie *First Blood,* Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone*,* always fought against a whole army of his enemy by himself.   He is the typical individualism and heroism symbol as well as superman.   "Secondly, American films intensively reflect the enthusiasm for science and technology" (2000, p. 23).   There are many typical movies.   The *Terminator*, *Star Wars*, and the *Matrix* series are world famous. "Thirdly, American film demonstrates the inclusiveness of other cultures" (2000, p. 23). *Garfield* and *Ice Age* represents the harmonious relationship between animals and humans. *Platoon* was about that war between Vietnam and United States.   *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was shot in France.   The screenwriter was Czech and the actors were from England, France, and Sweden.   "Learning English is different from [the] COBAL, PASCAL, and LISP program language.   It requires student to understand the culture background which you don't need to pay attention when learning those program

languages" (O Yangzhen, 2004, p. 3). This is the reason why many students in China cannot master English even after years of study.

In addition, Jack and Theodore (2000) think movies are a challenge for teachers. "To put it bluntly, actors and screenwriters couldn't care less that you're a foreigner! And they shouldn't" (p. 78). Indeed, movies are difficult to understand precisely because they are so "real world," at least from a linguistic perspective. This may make watching them incredibly frustrating, especially if you are at that level where you feel fluent, but still can't follow a lot of the dialog. Yet, the fact remains that there is probably no better source of linguistic input than a good film, if, paradoxically, one could just understand what is being said!

However, the advantages are obvious. "In the present ESL teaching in China, most schools haven't created opportunity and places for students to communicate with each other and express themselves in English. If continues to let students carry on the simple repetition of dialog simulation practices, it will be impossible to enhance the English communication ability remarkably" (Jiang Shufen, 2005, p. 76). In today's Internet age, although students can simply click to watch a movie from abroad, it is not clear if they really understanding the culture behind the movie.

It is without doubt that students like to watch movies. If the movie may raise the ability of student to learn English, it should enter the plan of instruction. "The course based on chalk and board and course books which make students passive and dependent upon their teachers do not motivate students to learn language and also do not motivate teachers to teach language" (Belgin Tanriverdi, 2007, p. 2). On the contrary, the western

commercial movies attract audiences by holding the audience's attention. Moreover, they can let the audience immerse themselves in the plot. If teachers lead the students to understand pertinent data of the movie, the class may further stimulate students' culture study enthusiasm. Compared to the traditional written textbook, even in some early US movies, the language is more nimble and natural, and has certain cultural study value.

Obviously, teachers using films to teach in ESL classrooms make it possible for students to obtain more knowledge about culture. If the movie content can stimulate a student's viewing enthusiasm, simultaneously it will also stimulate their enthusiasm to know the culture phenomenon behind it. "The movie which students care about and talk about enable them to get rid of anxiety and talk boldly and freely when they express their idea of the movie" (Jiang Shufen, 2005, p.90). Teachers can discover that, in the movie discussion process, they will hear the viewpoint from some students who usually do not like to interact with others, although sometimes the expression is not very smooth. Nevertheless, in this kind of situation, they demonstrate the communicative desire and motivation. The movie not only may stimulate the desire of students to communicate, but also may establish the foundation for exchanging viewpoints and conversation content. Western movies reflect many social phenomenon that will arouse students' attention, and stimulate their communicative enthusiasm about issues such as homosexuality, gender discrimination, euthanasia, religion, the green movement, and so on. Similar to Jiang's opinion, scholar Griffin thinks, "The goals of this activity for students are to a) practice discussion skill, and b) identify factors in movies that appeal to them" (1994, p. 6). In a

movie's content aspect, the teacher may guide the student to focus in common, directed problems, simultaneously enabling the student to get rid of anxiety and worry.

Approaches, Film Choices, and Effect

When choosing the movie, teachers need to show discernment.   Ask yourself this question: what makes a movie valuable for teaching?   Because "not all the movies from western countries can be seem as learning materials in ESL class" (Liu Qiong, 2003). Some movies attract students very much, but that does not mean that they have value for teaching.   Some action films are examples of this situation.   They are too plain to discuss.

When teachers choose the movie, "They should notice that if the movie content and the language can stimulate student's emotion" (Jiang Shufen, 2005).   Western culture is different from Chinese.   The students' feelings will affect the effectiveness of the class. For example, if a student has the feeling of confusion, that probably means that he found the differences between the two cultures and that is a good opportunity for the teacher to explain it.   Choosing such a movie has the purpose of raising discussion.   It can cause the student to produce certain motivations and the desire to understand the western culture.

As a teacher in ESL class, one should be devoted to showing students what the value is in watching a film.   If students intend to watch a movie in ESL class, they must understand that they are watching with particular concentration.   Of course, there is not including entertainment.   "One strategy is to start to develop a film memory.   Some

people are naturally endowed with an ability to recall lines of dialogue, but anyone can increase what she or he retains by experiencing a movie" (David, 2004, p. 25). One can decide to notice certain cultural aspects of an English film. Some people say that watching for too many details distracts them from the story, and it is true that many movies try not to call attention to detail. However, one can learn to watch for both detail and story. It is multitasking, like driving a car while carrying on a conversation. It just takes practice.

Still, at any moment a lot is going on in a movie; it is hard to watch for everything at once. That is why it is good to concentrate on certain elements. In addition, if students want to learn from a movie, for either writing or just in order to deepen their understanding, they may need to watch it several times. The students should have known how the movies they love reveal expected pleasures on repeated viewing. "A scene you didn't much care for becomes a new favorite after you understand what purposes it serves" (David, 2004, p.17). Subtitles of plot or performance stand out，when students know what is coming up next.

Repeated viewings are essential if you plan to teach about the culture in the film, and so is note taking. "Because movies are dense with all kinds of visual and sonic information, notes help students recall key points" (David, 2004, p. 20). How can they take notes? If you are teaching the class on video, no problem; you can stop, reverse, and replay as much as you like. Sometimes, though, students will have to write during a screening. Here students should not aim for perfect penmanship, since they are the only people who will have to decipher their scratches. Try writing without dropping eyes from

the screen; they will be surprised how legible the results can be.   They may want to use a light-tipped pen, which casts a small beam on the page to guide their writing without disturbing others.   However, "they are probably asking, if they can't capture everything, what do them take note on?   That will depend on your class project" (David, p. 24).

"The student groups should form their own ideas before the discussion part and in the discussion process about the movie content" (Jiang Shufen, 2005).   For instance, the student may introduce related knowledge about a movie's screenwriter, synopsis of plot, the historical background, the cultural background, and so on.

With the help of the teacher showing the films in the class, students should learn what the key point in a film is, where cultural differences happen, and what the reasons behinds these differences are.   After students master the skill to totally understand the culture background of the film, which means they know exactly what and how the information of the film was expressed to them, they will become confident in learning English.   Furthermore, the students will have fewer difficulties in the future.   Their abilities to speak and write are also improved, more so than by just knowing about grammar rules.

Summary

ESL classrooms in China typically teach English through use of grammar and vocabulary, but leaves out the cultural aspects of English. Watching films helps students who do not have the ability to visit English-speaking countries understand these cultures.

However, the teacher needs to be careful with which films he or she shows in his or her classroom because not all films show true Western cultures.

Chapter Three

Conclusions and Recommendations

In today's ESL class, students are more attracted by visual and audio materials. Although English films are everywhere in the world, the use of film still is an important decision in class. The content of the movie decides the effectiveness of the teaching. Teachers should make full use of students' interest and should be aware of methods they apply. They should give students a clear way to appreciate and be aware of cultural patterns in the movie they have watched. Instead of watching the Hollywood movie for entertainment, the students should pay more attention to details, especially in the part, which makes them confused. Teachers should help students develop movie memory as well as how to take notes. Discussion helps students to deeper excavate the cultural phenomenon in the movie.

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