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Film, TV and Videotapes in EFL

Introduction

Light breathes life through film celluloid as much as it does the stained glass of a Chartres or Wells cathedral. People watch upon the screen the unfolding of a tale, fictive or true or somewhere in between. Film narrative has more in common with these windows than with the books they often derive from. But viewers are not concerned by that fact. They come to enjoy the tale, and for a while escape the world beyond the font.

Television watching has never been quite the same as watching movies in movie theaters. As Marshall McLuhan writes, "With TV, the viewer is the screen." (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1967) Who has not experienced this effect, having walked into a darkened room where people sat bathed in television's projected light? The difference with movies is often described as the passivity of the television watcher, or couch potato. But in fact the viewers' active nature plagues television's raison d'être. Television researcher Peter Collet, writing in a recent *Sunday Times* article, says that "Viewers are very active. If they don't like something they'll switch over or else they'll engage in some other activity or not pay attention." (*The Sunday Times*, January 19, 1992). The story had better speak to people, or it will be zapped into the pitiless void of not being watched, and with it the advertising neighborhood.

Television and film narratives and their symbolic vocabularies are the common parlance of our age. Media studies specialist Roy Armes writes, "Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself [...] How television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged." (Roy Armes, *On Video*, 1988) Children are the least self-conscious narrators of television tales. Some families choose to have television in order not to deprive the kids before their schoolyard world of peers. Other families would rather deprive themselves of television than endure the consequences, perhaps motivated by arguments such as this one advanced by newspaper columnist George Will: "Seven US and Canadian studies establish correlations between prolonged childhood exposure to television and a proclivity for physical aggressiveness that extends from pre-adolescence into adulthood" (Will, *International Herald Tribune*, April 8, 1993).

It is unwise to think that television could have arrived on the scene without causing a stir. Television antagonist Neil Postman recently defined the conflict this way: "A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything. In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the print press. We had a different Europe. After television, the United States was not America plus television; television gave a new coloration to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry" (Neil Postman, *Technopoly*, 1992). This polemic did not sidestep the foreign language classroom. But another technological revolution has changed the debate out from under us. Now we have to cope with video.

Video changes how we live with television and how we watch movies. Media critic Sean Cubitt goes so far as to say that "that which can be repeated is already history. Fast-forward, vision-rewind and freeze-framing reintroduce television to the qualities of writing." (Sean Cubitt, *Timeshift: on Video Culture*, Routledge, 1991). By introducing the VCR into this narrative genre, the viewer is extended a potential as a film and television reader hitherto nonexistent. Previously, the viewer's command of the narrative was limited essentially to either looking at it or not. Now s/he can interact with the image-and-sound-based text, explore it, study it, play within it. Video allows the viewer time to look up from the "page" and reflect on what s/he has "read", before picking up where s/he left off.

Video makes film and television more practical to the EFL teacher as material. But film and television on video are not a priori the "authentic material" of choice, at least not in a

more thoroughbred, less tainted, language sense. Authentic is a misused and misleading TEFL term. John Fiske has written at great length about television's specific metadiscourses, its news-speak, its teledrama-speak, its sports-speak (*Television English*, 1987). EFL/ESL course books are no less tailored or structured. When we speak of video, authentic does not refer to the language, but to the medium. For example, when language teachers use newspapers or poetry, the English is no more authentic there than elsewhere in the family of English usage. The medium gives the authentic flavor, the whiff of vibrant context, the commerce of the language in one of its permitted forms.

In other words, video in the classroom implies working with the medium that delivers the language. Language is less the subject of our inquiry and more the consequence of our work. We do not want to render a film or a television program a zoo where language roams the spotted zero article. Put another way, viewing *Kramer versus Kramer* in order to observe the use of phrasal verbs or notional examples of anger is like choosing to share a ripe camembert in order to talk of cutlery. Ted Kramer's language reveals to us something about Ted, and the film about how we see Ted. The language class should not become the affective filter to the enjoyment of film.

Film and television thrive off the viewer's subjectivity. Fiske writes, "To be popular, the television text has to be read and enjoyed by a diversity of social groups, so its meanings must be capable of being inflected in a number of different ways. This means that reading is not a garnering of meanings from the text but is a dialogue between text and the socially situated reader." (Fiske, 1987). As an EFL practitioner, I read Fiske's comments this way: 1) our learners read television; 2) different learners read television in different ways; 3) television produces television that's readable in different ways. I am missing the boat if I do not attempt to tap the learners' knowledge of television rather than focusing continually and even obsessively on their understanding of spoken English.

The challenge then in using television and film on videotape is not solely in finding suitable language. It includes finding suitable television texts. Shorter-in-length video, that is a news report or an excerpt from a film or television program under three minutes long, is a manageable run time. Television advertising certainly meets this requirement. The typical television ad in France lasts about 21 seconds (*Les Chiffres-clés de la télévision française*, 1991). These 21 seconds are no less narratively and subjectively oriented.

Ads are a good place to begin with a more medium-sensitive approach to using video in your teaching. With monolingual groups, you might even consider ads taped off their own television, in their own language. Since the discourse practiced in class is not the wriggling butterfly of English netted on an English language native context, but the subjective expression of the message of a particular ad, there is ample justification in using native-language video. Video is a fine example of how process language, that is the language used when doing an exercise, is meaningful language work, especially when it concerns values and views about their own culture as presented by television advertising.

And ads can be particularly good television. "There's not a good filmmaker alive who doesn't look to us for inspiration," said Bob Giraldi, the director of ad spots for GE, Sperry Rand, McDonald's, and many other corporations, claimed in 1984. (Mark Crispin Miller, "Hollywood, the Ad", *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1990). Consider the following activities:

1. Ad freeze

LEVEL	Elementary upwards
TIME	10 minutes upwards
PREPARATION	Prepare your ad tape, choose the ads you'd like to work from, select the freeze frames you'd like to present.

IN CLASS

1. Present the group with a freeze frame from an ad. Example a) scene of a beach, bright sun, a woman in the distance in white dress strolling in the surf; b) a mountain pinnacle from which we see a hang glider taking off, with four legs visible. In pairs they brainstorm possible products the ad could be for.

2. Collect the brainstorming on the board. Use this format:

*It could be an ad
for a/an/the (the product)*

3. When you have added the brainstorming, add to the following the format above:

*It could be an ad for (the product)
because a/an/the...*

Encourage the learners to provide the reasoning behind the possibilities. These ideas offer a lot of insight in how images work to trigger or underline a product in our minds. In other words, the game goes beyond a simple guessing game. As discussion is the heart of the activity, encourage it by having the learners define these links between the product and the particular freeze frame.

4. Play the ad from the freeze frame, or replay from the beginning. Discuss the differences of anticipation to the ad itself. It is not necessary to play the sound. The images speak loudly enough.

Variation: Call my bluff

Turn the game over to the learners. A prerequisite: collect enough ads to go around on your videotape.

Form small groups and have each group prepare a freeze frame from an ad you have selected for them. Have them decide on four possible products the freeze frame could be an extract from, but only one of these four is right. They then present the freeze frame to the group and present all four products as if any of the four were right. The others discuss the scenarios, but are not allowed to ask any questions about the rest of the ad. The single freeze frame plus the four product identities are the only clues they have. The group votes or decides unanimously (the decision-making process is an interesting “problem” itself!) on which scenario they think is right. The group then plays the ad. Sound is not necessary.

It will be necessary to be able to turn the television away from the others and to show the learners how to operate the freeze frame and other controls. Also, you need to think of an exercise to occupy the others while the group is preparing their freeze frame. Allow each group about five minutes to prepare their freeze frame and four scenarios. They should reposition their freeze frame just before revealing it to the class, as the pause function normally lasts a few minutes.

Comment

The game has a language focus frame, but easily allows the learner to go much further, into the image grammar of advertising. There is no inherent need to use “native English” ads, in fact the challenge here is the reading of cultural signs available for reading in one freeze frame. A “native English” ad could be hard as the cultural signs are not necessarily in their television vocabularies. The classroom discussion easily turns to content rather than language. The exercise frame is the language practice, rather than the language on the video.

2. Talking & walking movie listings

LEVEL Pre-intermediate upwards

TIME 20-30 minutes

PREPARATION Pre-teach if necessary *wh*- questions, such as:

*Who directed the film? Who is the director?
Where does it take place? When does it take place?
How long does it last? What kind of film is it?
and so on.*

IN CLASS

1. Collect on the board titles of films members of the group have seen recently either at the movie theater or at home. Have each participant propose a different film so that the number of films listed on the board corresponds to the number of participants.
2. Ask the students to consult the list on the board and choose a film which they have not seen and would like to know something about. Have them circulate in the classroom and find the learner who has seen the film. The ideal pair has two partners, each of whom can talk about a film the other has not seen. These pairs then have a conversation, exchanging synopses about their respective films. Learners should be free to retell their films in as abridged a version as they feel comfortable with telling.
3. Encourage pairs who have finished telling their stories to find new partners by consulting the list on their board.

Variation

Ask learners to brainstorm favorite films.

Comments

The movie scenario creates for the learner a natural storytelling exercise. It is an everyday storytelling motif outside the classroom. Listeners are equally implicated because they have chosen the story they want to hear.

3. Briefing the absentees

LEVEL Elementary upwards

TIME 10-15 minutes

PREPARATION None. This is a revision activity when working with a longish film or television program. It presumes you have been working with the film a time or two before this class.

IN CLASS

1. Form groups with at least one person in each who needs briefing. Form as many groups as necessary.
2. Tell the members of the group who have seen the film or program to bring the absentee/s up to date. Give them a time limit, say five to ten minutes, depending on the amount of briefing necessary. Have them go into as much detail as time allows.
3. Check that the briefers all get a chance to speak. You might need to go around the groups and help that these “speaking transfers” are taking place. Some people may be reticent because they are uncertain about the details. Don’t then force them into speech. Offer a game-option of a ball or some object that when held gives this person the floor and the right to speak. This object usually helps the talkers to remember they are talking a lot and helps others to ask for the ball in order to have the right to add an item or two. For others, it is easy simply to hand over the narrative thread (and responsibility).
4. Go on now with another activity.

Comments

Briefing helps to keep all of group at more or less the same narrative place in the story. It also helps the others to consolidate their remembrances.

4. Music tells all

LEVEL	Elementary upwards
TIME	20 minutes
PREPARATION	Select a film, preferably from the 30's, 40's or 50's, which has a strong music soundtrack. An example would be the music in Hitchcock's <i>North by Northwest</i> , or Max Steiner's in <i>Casablanca</i> .

IN CLASS

1. Begin the exercise with a guided fantasy. Describe going to see a movie at a cinema. Evoke all the details, choosing a movie, going to the cinema, standing in the line, paying for the tickets, taking your tickets, finding a seat, waiting for the lights to go down, until the lights go down. Now ask the learners to describe in small groups what happens next. (Note that the fantasy given above is regionally determined; multi-cultural groups will have interesting variations to relate about going to movies "back home".) Have the learners focus on the moment the lights go down and just afterwards because it is a very important moment. It is the transition from the world of the moviegoer to the world of the movie. The momentary darkness is a voyage. After a brief logo for the producer (metonym for the exotica of Hollywood wherever the movie is made, a world in itself), the transition is complete. The first sensual suggestion of the new world, the movie world, is almost always through sound. And in many movies (especially the older ones) it is with music.
2. Turn the monitor around or otherwise mask the screen. Tell the learners that you are going to play the beginning of a movie. You would like them to listen to the music and write down anything the movie evokes for them. This could include colors, feelings, genres of movie, lines of dialog, anything. The game is: how much of the movie can be deduced from this overture? How a well-known film like *Casablanca* works in a game like this is curiously not obvious, because the music is intensely generic, not specific.
3. After the video, give the learners time to discuss in small groups their impressions. Then bring the group together and collect their associations and ideas on the board. Have a learner do the writing.
4. Replay the film unmasked. If the film you have chosen is an unknown classic, prepare a summary of the film. Give this summary to a pair of learners. Have them read it silently, then retell extempore to the group the contents of the summary. Compare the summary with the language on the board. Look for and discuss the parallels and diversions inspired by the music.

Comments

The exercise helps to develop an awareness of the nonlinguistic sound in video. It stimulates a discussion of genres like romance, drama, adventure, all transmitted by music. It stimulates memories and values like a good guided fantasy.

Acknowledgment

I recommend Umberto Eco's essay in *Travels in Hyperreality* on watching *Casablanca*.

5. Audio narrative markers

LEVEL Elementary upwards

TIME 15 minutes

PREPARATION Choose a five-minute sequence which has at least five scene changes. A scene change: one moment you are in Woody Allen's family apartment and then suddenly and instantly you are walking in Central Park.

IN CLASS

1. Turn the monitor away from the group. Ask one learner to come and sit where she can see the monitor. If you have a group larger than 15, ask another learner to come forward.
2. Tell everyone you are going to play a five-minute section of video. The other learners will be able to hear the video only. Ask them to note the scenes they hear. Write for example where they think a scene occurs, *e.g.*, in a park, in a restaurant, and note any familiar characters they hear in that scene. They should draw up a complete list of different scenes, including details they heard which distinguish one scene from another.
3. Play the video. As a matter of form, time the sequence carefully. Five minutes is a lot of video; and stopping exactly after five minutes will probably mean stopping in the middle of something. That is all right!
4. Allow the listening-only learners to talk about their observations in pairs. The viewing student (the knower, or "teacher") may wander around the groups and listen to the conversations, but should refrain from saying anything about the video.
5. The whole group exchanges views. Allow the discussion the time it takes to get all the different group observations out in the open. Afterwards, let the viewer learner "replay" the video by retelling what she remembers (her previous silence will probably require this release anyway, and the "information gap" is powerful).
6. Replay the video. Interestingly, the video will often differ not only from what the listeners imagine but from what the viewer remembered. Discuss these differences. "Errors" when working with video merit discussion time.

6. Cross reference: body language

LEVEL pre-intermediate upwards

TIME 30 minutes

PREPARATION Chose short sequences from film, television or EFL training videos, about 15-45 seconds long, which show two non-static people interacting naturally. The learners do not require prior knowledge of the sequence. The scene, should however be self-explanatory, "not ambiguous".

IN CLASS

1. Cut the sound. Distribute the cross-reference handout. Ask the learners to watch the sequence very carefully and note the various gestures they see used by the two principal characters. In the left column of the handout give a name for the gesture, in the middle column say what that gesture means, and in the right column write whatever language accompanied the gesture. It may be necessary to replay the sequence a time or two. You may care to pause on each gesture that is, if the learners indicate that you should pause and allow them time to take their notes.
2. Ask the learners to compare their notes. It is a good idea to run the video and freeze on the discussed gesture. Perhaps replay and listen to the accompanying language. Encourage discussion to focus on the various learners' opinions. Precision in the discussion is the heart of the discussion. The closer to this heart, the more the learner's own values come into the exercise.

3. Examples:

Hey there / I'd like your attention / I was looking at you from across the room.

Hug / We agree to disagree / Thank you for liking me.

(from *Tootsie*)

Comment

Learners can understand a lot of body language in whatever language. While body language is culture bound, it is certainly not a kind of corporeal Esperanto; there are clues to meaning. Access to this language can be more obvious to the learner than listening to the foreign language at speed. Working with this body language can build confidence in the learner's perceptions, and will help him or her to approach with eyes as well as ears.

Acknowledgment

The origin of the cross-reference idea, in this case using camera angle, what you see, and what you hear, I owe to Mike Lavery.

7. Fade in, fade out

LEVEL Elementary upwards

TIME 10-20 minutes

PREPARATION Select a video section which has several examples of fade-in and fade-out. Film is a good source. "Fade" is when an image dissolves into or out of a color, frequently black, or into or from another image. It is a classic form of cinematographic transition. Choose several such transitions. Your VCR needs a good pause. Normally this means there are four heads in it to "read" the image. It is useful if the remote control has a "jog" button. Jog allows you to advance or back up about one image at a time.

IN CLASS

1. Explain to the learners that they are going to play a guessing game about what they can see on the TV screen. Present a still you have chosen, which is either a mat color or a video still. Jog the video until the image begins to change. Begin to fire a battery of questions at the learners: "What can you see? Do you see any change? Can you describe what you can see?" You can focus the exercise on the learners using language to express nuances of certainty, such as "I am sure", "I think", "I am not sure", and so on.
2. Jog the image another still or two to keep the exercise lively. Classroom management can vary: have the learners shout out what they can see, or conduct the discussion in a meeting style, and so on.
3. Allow the learners to come to the monitor to use it as a tool to aid their expression. "You can see his nose here". "This is an arm." "I think this is a switchboard in the hotel."
4. Keep jogging until the image becomes clear. There is often a moment of great surprise, when the image suddenly, in one jog, becomes obvious. Talk about that. As a confirmation, rewind a little and show the transition at normal speed. You may use the sound here, though this is not an ulteriorly motivated listening exercise. Move on to another fade. Allow a learner to manage the jog button and the guessing game, in which case you may want the learner to see the selected transition in advance and thus play the role of "key".

Comments

The game can be played as a video revision game. But it is perfectly useable however with unseen video. Especially with film, where these fade-in and out transitions often have rather poetic dimensions. In any case, learners of a rather low linguistic level can work with well-known film images.

NB: Keep in mind that pause functions normally shut down after two to five minutes. Rather than an inconvenience, this keeps the game lively. Be prepared then to reset the image from time to time. This is far less troublesome than it may sound.

Richard Cooper

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