Film English: Using Films to Teach English

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Introduction

Students arrive in university with many English language problems: poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, slow reading, bad grammar, nonexistent conversational skills, to name the most obvious. Films can help on all counts. This is due in part to the fact that films use language so extensively in performing their cultural work. Narrative films in particular use language to advance plot, define characters, establish mood, and simply tell us what is going on. Language plays a crucial role in connecting and rationalizing the various other forms of visual and sound information that make up film experience. Insofar as realism is the dominant style of a film, its language approximates language use in real life, thereby demonstrating practical application. Vocabulary and listening-comprehension are not the only skills improved by watching films. Subtitles and closed captioning (dialogue and other sound information printed across the bottom of the frame) can help students increase reading speed. Films can also serve as the basis for writing assignments and oral presentations, especially when they are combined with the diverse film resources now readily accessible on the Internet. In short, films provide an invaluable extension of what we might call the technologies of language acquisition that have been used to teach students the basics of English in elementary and high school.

But films can do more than this. Properly selected and presented, films can do what is perhaps most difficult in university language teaching: move students to speak. By *speak* I do not mean perform. Performative English is English learned and recited for various

occasions, from speech competitions and drama presentations to oral examinations and interviews. Nor do I mean the English words and phrases that students repeat into tape recorders in language labs. As useful as these exercises are, they are not speaking English in any relational sense. They certainly do not constitute conversation. The majority of students who arrive in Taiwan's universities have had little opportunity to speak English in a context where communicative exchange is possible. And simply asking them to continue performing the kind of speech simulation they have in the past will not advance them beyond whatever technological competence they have previously attained.

Students love movies. It is difficult to overstate the point. In fact, if films did nothing more than extend the previous technologies of language acquisition they would be well worth adding to our curricula insofar as they have the capacity to extend them quite considerably. The very means whereby a commercial film attracts and entertains its audience function not only to hold students' attention, but also to draw them into the world that film presents. Language is part of that world. Films create an enthusiasm for learning matched only by the Internet, which as I said can easily be integrated with film based assignments. Even when they are on older films, these invariable reflect a higher level of application than assignments based on more conventional readers and textbooks. When film assignments are performative exercises, again students' enthusiasm can be astonishing, especially if the film is popular and reasonably current. Specialty websites supply scripts that can be used for re-enacting favorite scenes, and online film reviews allow students to research speeches and class presentations. Using films for language training exploits the same drives and interests the film industry uses to sell tickets. Or more accurately, we exploit the affective apparatus that the film industry has developed for this purpose.

Once again, however, there is more to be gained from films in the language classroom than simply extending already established methods. If films inspire enthusiasm for language

projects, they also inspire language. Films that students care about, in other words, they talk about—and if they care enough, they talk in spite of anxieties that otherwise hold them back. The most timid and most apathetic students often find their voices in their immediate need to express feelings about a film they have just seen. Beyond generating a visceral desire to speak, films provide a basis for conversation in the highly charged viewing experience that students share with each other. Homosexuality in *The Crying Game*, interracial violence in *Do the Right Thing*, gender injustice in *Thelma and Louise*, the meaningless death of children in *The Sweet Hereafter*: all move viewers deeply, and in so doing they stimulate discussion. Alternately, the instructor can ask questions that destabilize the assumptions that inform more mundane film experience, producing thereby the same desire to speak and resolve anxieties that such a destabilizing produces. A light, entertaining comedy like *Desperately Seeking Susan* becomes risky and disturbing when one's beliefs about the codes of gender conduct are exposed and questioned.

Examples like these also reveal an additional advantage to using films to teach English, which is that they can increase dramatically the intellectual content of a class. As important as language training is, its educational value in terms of exposing students to new ideas lies somewhere between memorizing the telephone book and attending summer camp. Films *are ideas*, and the films best suited for the purpose of teaching language challenge students to examine all aspects of their personal, social, and cultural lives. Different students respond in different ways, obviously, depending on age and experience: freshmen, seniors, continuing education, science, and professional students. But it is a mistake to prejudge on the basis of age, for example, or academic major. This is particularly important in that underrating a group of students can undermine the purpose of the exercise, which is to provide them with an *interest* in speaking that resists the mere performance of language. Performance is the result of boredom. While freshman undergraduates are typically more

difficult to engage, say, than adults in continuing education, this does not mean they are stupid. Underrate a class by selecting films or topics that fail to challenge students, and not only do you risk transforming them into zombies, but you also miss the opportunity to hear what they have to say. I am continually astonished at the insight and sophistication shown by my first year non-English majors in addressing questions of value and justice as they turn up in the films I show. Often they are wrong—although on more occasions that I would like to admit I have to adjust my own views thanks to the insights of students. But discussion itself helps to revise opinions, or at the very least it allow students to begin reflecting on those opinions they now hold.

Film Selection

Not just any film will do. Indeed, it is often surprising what films will not do— meaning, films that students like, they may have nothing to say about. As might be expected, action pictures do not work. The issues are usually too black and white to promote discussion. Also ineffective are the many Hollywood films that appear every year designed to attract large numbers of young people with varying combinations of sex, violence, and gross humor. These are not bad films. There is just not much to say about them. The same goes for films that deal with obscure problems or problems remote from the experience of students; films that are too subtle in how they present their problems; or films that are too closed in how they wrap up their problems as the specific problems that constitute plot. Norman Jewison's 1987 romantic comedy, *Moonstruck*, is, as reviewers avowed, a minor masterpiece. And students to whom I showed the film agreed, acknowledging its humor, thoughtfulness, and warmth. But they did so mutely. Smiles and nods gave way to verbal formulations only when I myself pressed them with questions. Whatever the film's merits, they do not include sending viewers into the lobby eager to engage in debate.

Debate is what we want. Films that produce it as a spontaneous response to viewing combine the visceral provocation of action films with problems that *are debatable*. The moral certainty of *Godzilla* leaves little to argue about in terms of how its central conflict should be resolved. This is not the case in *Do the Right Thing*, where the right or wrong of violence as a response to social injustice is hotly contested both inside and outside the film. Students are shocked by Mookie's act of vandalism, which sets off the concluding riot and rudely disrupts a viewing experience that to this point has combined vaguely comic representations of racial antagonism with an exotic locale, appealing characters, funky soundtrack, and enjoyable, if idiosyncratic visual style. As the character immediately responsible for this disruption, Mookie typically attracts the most criticism. But not all students share this view. Some suggest that Mookie's violence saves Sal and his sons from serious injury at the hands of the mob. Some point out that it is in fact Sal who first racializes his disagreement with Radio Raheem and then resorts to violence when he refuses to comply. While such opinions are in the minority in students' essays, they can be used to inspire participation in debates by assigning them to designated groups. The ambiguities that Spike Lee builds into the plot of the film provide the basis for an animated classroom conversation in which students explore the consequences of violence as a response to injustice and as a way to obtain redress.

This is not the place to examine in any detail the ways in which *Do the Right Thing* stimulates conversation—which was Lee's expressed purpose in making the film. But it is clear that in accomplishing this purpose he used two primary devises: one was violence, and the other was his audience's highly charged feelings about race and racially based social conflicts. In other words, *Do the Right Thing* produces language by targeting emotions that are unstable and so easily provoked. Many films function this way to provide emotional entertainment, combining more-or-less naturally unstable feelings, such as those associated

with sex and violence, with topical issues that currently (or perennially) lie close to the surface of the audience's affective life. For the purpose of encouraging conversation in language training, films are best that use this kind of emotional provocation in the context of, as I put it earlier, debatable issues.

I mention the use of emotions in cinema because it pinpoints simultaneously the strengths and difficulties of using films in the way I propose. Films move students; but they do so in ways that may not always be productive. When *Do the Right Thing* opened in American theaters in June of 1989, local authorities had good reason to fear that racial violence in the film was so provocative that it threatened to incite racial violence on the street outside. This would be unlikely to occur in a Taiwanese classroom. But films that deal with other issues do pose the threat of emotional disruption. Feelings are not toys. When a film engages highly charged issues such as rape or homosexuality the instability of feelings associated with them can be dangerous. Racial and political topics can also be charged in this way. Even the use of profanity in a film can cause problems in that it may diminish student's concentration and seriousness. My own approach is to confront touchy issues directly, often addressing them at the outset before I show a film or turn it over to students, often defusing potential problems with humor or an appeal to reason, maturity, and the need for openness. I also choose not to show some films, sometimes because I'm not sure if a class can handle them, sometimes because I'm not sure if I can. A teacher's feelings are not toys either. Beyond embarrassing subject matter, student opinions are often not just ill formed, but offensive, and at times their more egregiously racist, sexist, and homophobic claims are best avoided. As excited as I like conversations to become, when excitement leads to agitation and that agitation is mine students become quickly silent. Judgements about specific films and classes have to be made by teachers themselves on a case by case basis.

A more mundane (though still important) set of judgements has to do with presenting film language. Among the advantages of using films in language training is, once again, the fact that characters in them approximate real-world language use. In addition to demonstrating aspects of spoken language such as tone and emphasis that are difficult to convey in other instructional forms, films provide an opportunity to become accustomed to idiom, slang, regional accents, and the everyday corruption of language that occurs among native speakers. For advanced students, films thus provide a valuable learning resource. But for less advanced students they pose comprehension problems. One solution is to show older American films from the 1950s and 1960s. Students tend to find these less engaging, but the standards of film realism were lower in these decades, especially where language is concerned. Dialogue is usually uniformly audible, and variables such as accent and idiom are minimized. Other options include the use of Mandarin subtitles or English closed captioning, depending on ability. While my instincts are always to press students as hard as I think they will bear, this can backfire if the goal is in fact conversation. English captioning helps improve reading. But films are not meant to be read; they are meant to be watched, and it is in watching a film that students engage it most closely. So if their English reading ability is poor, students spend more time reading the captioning (and less time watching) than if they are allowed to see a film with Mandarin subtitles.

Class Format

Class format will change according to the usual variables: number of students, their relative skill and maturity, class duration, availability of screening facilities, etc. Ideally, small groups are best (6-8 students), and if one of the goals is discussion these groups should meet as soon as possible after the film is shown. As most classes are large and facilities limited, some form compromise is necessary. For upper year oral training courses I schedule

one screening a week in the evening and divide regular class time (the next day) into 90 minute sessions during which I meet alone with individual groups of ten or less. Groups I am not seeing work on other assignments elsewhere (i.e., in another classroom). Separation is good as it allows a greater sense of intimacy within the group I am seeing. The membership of different groups should remain static, also to encourage intimacy and trust, thereby lessening the embarrassment of students who are shy about speaking in front of others. For lower level (freshman) courses I show a film and then use it as the basis for class activities for the next three to four weeks. This usually involves a combination of assignments including readings, compositions, Internet research, and group debates.

Assignments

One of the first things I say in introducing a Film English course is that it is not a film studies course. I repeat this several times during the semester. Telling students that Film English is not Film Studies does two things. First, it reassures them that it is not an academic course per se. Whatever film studies content there is, in other words, students will know they are being graded on their language and not on what they learn about a subject they are unfamiliar with and so may find intimidating. Second, by telling students that it is not a film studies course you help to keep them focused on their language at times when intellectual content begins to dominate and their attention to language begins to decrease. In good classes this almost always happens.

Reading: In addition to reading exercises associated with closed captioning, I use secondary readings on films to improve vocabulary and comprehension. Such readings include reviews, biographical sketches on filmmakers and stars, studio publicity, background information on film subject matter, news about the film industry, and simple film analysis. These I obtain

from a vast array of sources, from online databases to magazines like *Time Express*, and I keep files on the films I use repeatedly. For upper-year classes I make up packets with these readings, either as resources for student discussions or as the basis for quizzes. For freshman, I read these materials in class, explaining language and ideas as I go and quizzing them orally in later classes.

Writing: Films provide topics for the usual range of writing assignments. In conversation courses I usually ask students to submit a short (1 to 2 page) response to each film on the day it will be discussed as a way of insuring that they have formulated some ideas about a film before they have to talk about it. If the time between screening and class is too short, I ask for it the next week. Responses are to be well written and focus on one or two main points. This has to be spelled out as students often see the "response" format as less rigorous than formal essays, often leading to sloppy work. I also have them pass in their responses each week, whether I plan to grade them or not. Formal emphasis on writing assignments also discourages students from enrolling who are simply attracted by the idea of watching films for credit. For freshman I ask for a 1 to 2 page essay on each film, length depending on ability. For this assignment I pose the questions, usually simple ones that addresses central points in the film.

A note on plagiarism: A problem I run into with greater frequency in writing assignments on films is plagiarism. This may be because of the easy access students have to film information on the Internet. Recent years have seen a proliferation of film reviews on the web. I combat plagiarism, first, by becoming familiar with the Internet material available on a film I show. Second, I myself tell students the location of Internet film resources—so they know I know. (Appendix Two has a list of film websites.) And third, I include on their

syllabus a strict policy on plagiarism, saying precisely what it is and what penalties it incurs. These I make quite steep.

Internet Searching: As troublesome as it may be in encouraging plagiarism, the Internet is an invaluable teaching resource. I already mentioned the material available online that can be used to compile readings on films. But the Internet is also useful as an archive that students themselves can explore. Film review databases are particularly good places to send students to get ideas for presentations or debates. Film homepages are also useful for these purposes. This kind of self-directed learning generates interest among students and never fails to turn up new information.

Debates: Freshman classes are usually too large to divide into individual discussion groups. The range of speaking abilities also makes groups difficult to run effectively. Poor speakers have few opportunities to speak or if they do they break the flow of the conversation. So I organize students into groups that debate questions that I give them. Each group has four to five students with abilities that range from poor to excellent. Better speakers are required to help poorer ones and I grade groups as a whole to make sure this happens. Every student must take responsibility for making at least one point that supports their group's position, and I tell all members to be ready to refute arguments made by the opposing group. This result is a combination of scripted speeches and spontaneous responses. I moderate debates, helping shy students and recapitulating all points as they are made to make sure students outside the debating groups hear and understand. On contentious points I ask outside students to take part. I also do this if things are moving to slowly. This assignment can demand considerable energy from the teacher, especially if you conduct two or three debates in a row. But with practice and good planning the results can be excellent.

Group Presentations: Group presentations are also useful in giving students an equal opportunity to speak. They also work well in combination with Internet searches and writing assignments. These take too long for everyone in a large class to give a presentation for each film. But presentations can be used along with debates to provide background information on a film: biography, for example, history, or cultural information that students can use in their debates and other assignments.

Group Discussion: Group discussion works best when the groups are small and the students are fairly advanced. I appoint a student to lead each discussion, and they are responsible for distributing a list of questions they want to discuss before class begins. They are not made responsible for the discussion itself, beyond acting as focal points and coordinators who see that less aggressive students have an opportunity to speak. Because questions are important in initiating discussion, I assist leaders in formulating them. Leaders also pick the films they lead from a list I provide. While I am open to suggestions, this list (Appendix One) is pretty much set from the first week of class. When a film, director, or star has a degree of notoriety I often ask one of the more timid students to give a short report. I also intervene when the discussion is faltering. But teacher involvement is best minimized as students will defer to your opinion (ending their own conversational thinking) or they will come to depend on your intervention. As painful as it may be, silence is often necessary for students to gather their thoughts and move ahead with the topic or move on to a new one. When the students in a class are *student teachers* a further component can be added to this assignment by asking them to submit questions, usually three, with a brief discussion of why one of the questions is good for the purpose of promoting discussion. This gets them thinking about the problems of

developing questions as part of the curriculum. The problem of questions as questions also leads to interesting discussion in and of itself.

A note on grading: I grade on language not content, and tell students this in order to promote openness in discussion. The more relaxed they feel about *what* they talk about leads to more *that* they talk about, which is what we want. I also look for conversational engagement more than technical ability, and I tell students this for the same reason. Which is not to say I ignore problems of diction and pronunciation, but over-emphasizing them only makes students think about language rather than speak it. Technical language problems can be worked out more effectively in other contexts, the language lab for example. Properly run, a discussion group provides an opportunity unavailable elsewhere to develop confidence and spontaneity.

Other Assignments: Two other assignments that teachers often use in language courses are enacting scenes from films, and showing films that are adaptations of stories that students are asked to read. Screening film adaptations is a common practice in literature courses as a way of bringing narratives to life. Films can perform a similar function in the language classroom while also anchoring assignments that ask students to discuss the differences between written and film versions. Performances in which students re-enact scenes from films are inspiring and fun. Comedies typically work best, although with the right class high drama can also be effective. It is important that students select their own scenes. Scripts can often be found online (Appendix Two) or in published versions. If they can't, students can transcribe them from the closed captioning or print out the captioning using a computer. I particularly like to use this assignment in the period after midterm exams when students (and teachers) need their energies rejuvenated.

Reference Books: A useful book for teachers and students alike is Timothy Corrigan's *A Short Guide to Writing about Film.* It is *very* short, inexpensive, and remains focused on the ways of talking and writing about films—with several sample essays. Longer general books on films that teachers may wish to consult include Louis Giannetti's *Understanding Movies* and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art, an Introduction*.

Appendix One: Films for Debate and Discussion

The following list is obviously not exhaustive. Nor are the films on it guaranteed to work.
Student tastes are unpredictable. Experience will help teachers customize the list so that it
meets both their needs and the needs of their students. A * marks films with which I have
had personal success in teaching.

Spike Lee	DO THE RIGHT THING *
	JUNGLE FEVER
Everyday Life in America	AMERICAN GRAFFITI
	BLUE VELVET*
Canadian	EXOTICA *
	THE SWEET HEREAFTER *
Robert De Niro	THE DEER HUNTER
	TAXI DRIVER
Comedy	GROUNDHOG DAY*
	WHEN HARRY MET SALLY
	GOOD MORNING VIETNAM
Gay	MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE
	THE CRYING GAME *
Historical	A ROOM WITH A VIEW*
	SENSE AND SENSIBILITY
Education	GOOD WILL HUNTING*
	UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE*
	PAPER CHASE*
	MONA LISA SMILE*
	FREEDOM WRITERS*
	HALF NELSON*
Asian American	THE WEDDING BANQUET
	THE GOOD LUCK CLUB
	DIM SUM *
Working Class	A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE
	THE GRAPES OF WRATH
	LONESTAR
Law and Society	SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION *
	THE PEOPLE VS. LARRY FLYNT
Men and Women	THELMA & LOUISE *
	A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN*
	DESPERATLY SEEKING SUSAN *
Mystery	CHINATOWN
	VERTIGO
	THE CONVERSATION *
	PULP FICTION
Weird Mothers	THE GRIFTERS
	THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE
Family	SWEETIE
	HANNAH AND HER SISTERS *
	CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS *

Appendix Two: Websites

General Information, Credits, Plot summaries, Characters Names
http://www.imdb.com

Actors and Directors
http://www.movieactors.com/index2.htm
http://www.Actress-Actor.com/
http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Lot/4000/main.html
http://dir.yahoo.com/Entertainment/Actors_and_Actresses/Complete_Listing/
http://dir.yahoo.com/Entertainment/Movies_and_Film/Filmmaking/Directing/Directors/

Reviews
http://www.mrqe.com

Scripts and Transcriptions
http://simplyscripts.home.att.net/

Purchasing
http://www.reel.com/Reel.asp
http://www.facets.org
http://www.amazon.com

Appendix Three: Glossary of Film Terms

Angle: The camera angle relative to the subject. A high-angle shot is photographed from above, a low-angle shot from below.

Cinematographer: The person responsible for operating the photography of a film: i.e., operating the camera, lighting the set, etc.

Cut: The point in a film where one shot is joined to another.

Dialogue: Conversation between characters.

Director: The person who co-ordinates the shooting and editing of the film.

Editing: Joining the separate shots of a film together in the desired order.

Flashback: The interruption of events in present time to provide information about the past.

Frame: The edges of the screen image.

Framing: The act of positioning the camera so that the frame includes or excludes specific visual information.

Freeze Frame: When the image in the frame remains static.

Genre: A type of film as defined by theme, style, narrative structure, or content. An example would be the "horror film" or "melodrama."

Handheld Shot: A kind of shot made with a small, hand-held camera. Usually unstable.

Independent Producer: A filmmaker not associated with a big film studio such as Disney.

Lens: The glass opening at the front of the camera through which light passes.

Literal Adaptation: A movie based on a stage play or novel in which the dialogue and plot remain true to the original.

Loose Adaptation: A movie based on a stage play or novel in which the dialogue and plot only superficially resemble the original.

Mise en Scene: Everything that is photographed and appears within the frame of the finished film, including sets, lighting, costumes, props, and stars.

Monologue: One person speaking, with or without others listening.

Motif: A technique, object, or thematic idea that is repeated throughout the film.

Pan : Movement of the camera from side to side from a fixed base.

Producer: The person responsible for the practical aspects of making a film such as financing, labor relations, or transportation.

Scene: Usually a series of shots that make up a compositional unit of the film. Often a scene is defined by a location, an incident, or a dramatic event.

Script: The written instructions for a film's dialogue and action.

Shot: A film image uninterrupted by a cut or a movement of the frame.

> **Long Shot:** A shot that shows the whole body.
>
> **Close-up Shot:** A shot that includes only a person's face or head.
>
> **Crane Shot:** A shot taken from a crane that holds the camera above the ground usually looking down at the subject.
>
> **Medium Shot:** A fairly close shot showing the human body from the waist up.
>
> **Point of View Shot:** A shot taken from the point of view of a character, showing what the character sees.
>
> **Reaction Shot:** A shot that shows the reaction of a character to something that has occurred in the preceding shot.
>
> **Tilt Shot:** A shot made by moving the camera up and down on a stationary support.
>
> **Tracking Shot:** A shot made with a camera moving on a track or on wheels.
>
> **Zoom Shot:** A shot that gets closer to its subject not by moving the camera closer but by using a zoom lens that makes it appear closer.

Sound Effects: The sound in a film other than the dialogue or music.
Soundtrack: The music of a film.
Star: An actor/actress of great popularity who plays the central roles in films they perform in.
Star Vehicle: A film that is made to display the talents of a particular star.
Symbol: An object, event, or technique in a film that has meaning beyond its literal meaning.
Take: A shot produced by one uninterrupted running of the camera.
Voice-over: A voice of someone not seen in the film that narrates or comments on its events.