Multimodal Movie Reviews for the EFL Classroom

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Article History

Keywords

Abstract

Even in the age of social media, movies remain popular among the general population and young people in particular. Movies are a rich source of authentic and engaging spoken language. Nevertheless, it can be difficult for language learners to extract value from films with their non-standard language, rapid pace, and unfinished, context-dependent sentence fragments. Thus, this paper outlines a process that aims to aid students in navigating this challenging linguistic landscape. The procedure focused on a series of student-centered activities that helped learners to write structured, descriptive movie reviews, which were then transformed into YouTube-style video reviews. The structural framework enabled learners to watch complete feature films in English and discuss the movies meaningfully while learning vocabulary, improving pragmatic competence, and developing multimodal communication skills.

Introduction

Despite the rising popularity of social media, movies remain one of the most popular pastimes for young people. A 2021 survey found that around 75% of 18 to 34-year-olds watch a movie at least once a week (Statista, 2022). Even with a flourishing domestic film industry in Japan, English-language movies account for a substantial portion of the movies viewed (Box Office Mojo, n.d.; FlixPatrol, n.d.). Given the interest of young people in Hollywood movies, the form should be a rich source of enjoyable content for English language students.

There are numerous documented benefits of movie use in the classroom, such as increased listening skills, communicative ability, and motivation (Curtis, 2007; Goctu, 2017; Ismaili, 2013). In particular, learner-directed movie choices can aid the student to become more invested in the content. Moreover, seeing the language used in real-world contexts can stimulate students' interest in the L2 culture (Baratta & Jones, 2008; Kaiser, 2011; Zhang, 2013). Thus, the second language can become a tool for enquiry and fulfillment, feeding a virtuous cycle of continuous improvement.

Textbooks provide an excellent introduction and reference for the workings of the English language. However, students are often confused by how their learning contrasts with the natural use of language in English-speaking countries, with its colloquial expressions, high pace, and variety of accents. Movies can help bridge some of this gap. However, caution must be exercised as film language sometimes tends toward an exaggerated reality. Even so, as Kabooha (2016) found in a study of a university class, pragmatic competence can be noticeably improved: "Students …reported that through films they were able to learn how native speakers initiate and sustain a conversational exchange, negotiate meaning, and nonverbal communication."

Movies can also help students build vocabulary, improve listening, and cultivate critical thinking as long as the teacher supplies activities to practice these skills in relation to the source material (Curtis, 2007; Goctu, 2017; Ismaili, 2013). Thus, simply watching a movie in the students' L2 is unlikely to improve most students' language ability and may even cause frustration and boredom. There are numerous options for focusing learners' attention on a movie, such as discussions, cloze listening/vocabulary tasks, or prediction activities. However, the procedure described in this paper aimed to integrate movies more deeply into the learning process and enable greater student autonomy in selecting and studying content. These materials were created specifically for a unit within a Media English course. However, if implemented carefully, English classes across a broad range of courses could also exploit the motivational and communicative benefits of movies.

Purpose

This paper describes a two-stage process for creating movie reviews, which was implemented within a communicative language class. Initially, students learned the conventions of written film reviews through the use of interactive activities and group discussions. Learners then applied this knowledge to write a review of a film of their choice. Subsequently, students transformed their work into a YouTube-style video with its alternative structural conventions and communicative styles. The process thus deepened learners' understanding of linguistic register and multimodal communications (the interaction of words, images, and sound effects) to give students greater control over their output in the target language.

Procedure

This unit was implemented in university classes of second-year English majors with 16 – 24 pre-intermediate to intermediate-level members (from around TOEFL ITP 450 or

CEFR B1). The classes met for two 90-minute lessons each week. All the students used iPads and had access to Wi-Fi. This unit was completed over five weeks, around 10 lessons in total, as outlined in the following sections.

In lesson 1, the teacher introduced the topic along with some new vocabulary using an activity called Movie Guess, Figure 1. This activity was most successful when the instructor modeled this first for the class. For example, the teacher first chose a movie and said, "I am thinking of a movie. It takes place in America in the near future. Can anyone guess?" The instructor then wrote "Setting – America in the near future" on the whiteboard and repeated the hint verbally. The teacher then chose more hints from the worksheet and wrote them on the board until a student guessed the movie title, in this case, *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008). After repeating this process for an additional example movie, the teacher checked the students' understanding of the key terms from the worksheet: genre, setting, personality, and plot. Once the terms were reviewed, students chose two movies and completed the worksheets individually, keeping their choices secret. Next, learners were divided into groups of four members and each took turns reading their hints while the other group members tried to guess the movies.

Figure 1
Movie Guess Worksheet

In the next activity, learners were allocated to new groups and tasked with finding definitions for a set of movie review words or phrases. For example, in a class with six groups of four, each group wrote definitions for four words. Each group's words were then compiled to create a vocabulary list of 24 items. The teacher then added the definitions to the vocabulary application Quizlet. The application has several learning modes that students could use to learn independently and games that could be employed

for warm-up activities to study collectively in the classroom. An example of the vocabulary set is included in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Movie Review Vocabulary – Quizlet Set 1

In lesson 2, the teacher began the session with one of the vocabulary games in Quizlet. Then, students watched short Pixar movies, discussed the contents of the movies, and wrote quick, informal movie reviews. This activity served as an introduction to reviewing and a way to practice the vocabulary learned in Figure 2. The teacher

assigned the students to groups of four, with each learner given one of the following movies to watch on their iPad or smartphone: *Partly Cloudy* (Sohn, 2009), *Lifted* (Rydstrom, 2006), *Geri's Game* (Pinkava, 1997), or *Mike's New Car* (Docter & Gould, 2002). The learners took notes about their allotted video using the "Your Notes" and "Extra Notes" sections of the worksheet in Figure 3. Upon completing their notes, students took turns showing their video to the group and then used the "Extra Notes" section of Figure 3 to discuss the movie. Learners updated their notes with further detail in light of their classmates' opinions. Finally, students used the second page of the worksheet to begin writing the informal review, which they finished for homework. Formal grading was unnecessary at this stage as the objective was for students to practice organizing information and expressing their opinions. Therefore, the teacher simply provided general feedback on how clearly learners had organized their materials and expressed their ideas.

Figure 3
Pixar Short Movie Worksheet

In lesson 3, students were given a test on Vocabulary Set 1. The learners were then given a second vocabulary set, focusing on some descriptive language necessary for discussing films. On this occasion, the definitions were completed for the students. The set is included in Figure 4.

Figure 4
Movie Review Vocabulary – Quizlet Set 2

Next, the instructor gave the students a two-part quiz. The quiz used two simplified movie reviews to spotlight the essential features of a film review in an engaging manner. The first round of the quiz highlighted structural and grammatical conventions such as the use of present tense (literary present tense) to recount the plot in a film review. The instructor used a review from the British Council's Teaching English website (n.d) based on the film *The Theory of Everything* (Marsh, 2014). Students were assigned groups and given around five minutes to read the review. Next, the groups were given a reaction quiz with the fastest student to respond with the correct answer earning points for their group. The questions and answers are shown in Figure 5 for illustration.

Figure 5
Questions and Answers for Round 1 of the Movie Review Quiz

1. What is the title of the film? (1pts)
The Theory of Everything
2. What genre is it? (1pts)
biographical drama
3. What is the movie about? (2pts)
The story of Hawking's relationship with Jane, the diagnosis of his motor neuron disease and his success as a physicist
4. What is the film setting (place & time)? (2pts)
England in the early 1960s
5. Who stars in the film? (1 point each person = 2pts)
Eddie Redmayne and Felicity Jones
6. Who is the main character? (1pt)
Stephen Hawking
7. What is the main character's personality in the film? (2pts)
Clever and brave
8. What kind of person would like this film? (2pts)
People who like true stories
9. What tense is the plot review written in? (2pts)
Present simple
10. How many stars does the reviewer give the movie? (2pts)
Four stars

Score: /14

The second round of the quiz, Figure 6, was more challenging and designed to highlight additional structural elements of movie reviews. Round two employed an original movie review written by the instructor that used vocabulary from Quizlet Set 2. Students remained in the same groups and were given a copy of the review and the question worksheet minus the answers. The groups were given 10 – 15 minutes to read the review, depending on the class level. Each group then discussed the questions and completed the worksheet in 10 – 15 minutes. Finally, the teacher reviewed the answers with the class and awarded points to each group according to their responses.

Figure 6
Round 2 of the Movie Review Quiz

After the quiz, the teacher outlined the review structure more systematically, using the factsheet in Figure 7. This document uses the comments function of Google Documents to detail the necessary information for each paragraph. This document was distributed to the students at the end of the lesson.

Figure 7
Movie Review Structure Factsheet

For homework, students chose an English-language movie to watch before the next lesson. Learners were instructed to view the film in English with English subtitles. At this point, students were informed that they should aim to follow the gist of the story rather than try to understand every word in the film. Nevertheless, students were asked to pause the movie and take note of vocabulary that was particularly interesting or key to the story. Learners made notes about their movies using the worksheet in Figure 8 which follows the review structure outlined in Figure 7. In addition, learners prepared discussion questions related to their movie, which they used for a discussion in the next class.

Figure 8
Movie Notes and Discussion Worksheet

To begin lesson 4, the students took a test on the second Quizlet set and then conducted the discussions using their questions from Figure 8. Learners were then rotated into new groups and conducted the discussion again to increase practice time and expose learners to a wider variety of perspectives. After the conversations, the teacher introduced the movie review instruction sheet, Figure 9, and students began planning the writing of their movie reviews.

Figure 9
Instruction Sheet for the Written Movie Review

In lesson 5, students began writing their reviews, which they completed for homework before lesson 6. During lesson 5, the teacher consulted with each student individually, offering advice where necessary. This writing task could have been completed entirely for homework, thus keeping class time for more interactive, discussion-based activities. However, this dedicated lesson time focused students on the task and helped them complete it according to the schedule.

Upon completing the written review, the teacher graded the work as usual, and then the transformation of the written review to a YouTube review commenced in lesson 6. Learners were informed that the task was not simply to recite their review on screen but to adapt the vocabulary and delivery style to fit this alternative format. Therefore, this first class of the video section focused on foregrounding the features that contribute to creating successful YouTube videos. The YouTube video creation phase is described in detail in Beirne (2023), but it will be outlined here briefly. In lesson 6, students first introduced their favorite Japanese YouTubers to classmates in groups of four. Then, students repeated the activity with English-language YouTubers. Learners were given a worksheet, Figure 10, to help them uncover the effective linguistic and non-verbal communication patterns used by famous YouTubers.

Figure 10
Worksheet – What Makes a Good YouTuber?

In lesson 7, learners watched English language movie reviews from YouTubers (Jeremy Jahns, n.d.; Chris Stuckmann, n.d.; Black Nerd REVIEW, n.d.) to hone in on the effective characteristics of successful reviewers, which students would eventually mimic in their own videos. Students were instructed to choose a favorite movie and watch each of the YouTubers' reviews of that movie. Then, in groups of four, learners discussed the similarities and differences of the YouTubers using the worksheet in Figure 10. Following the discussion, learners documented their opinions in the worksheet. After the lesson, the teacher harvested the "good YouTuber" features from the students' YouTuber discussion worksheets (Figure 10) and edited them into a concise guide of the 15 – 20 most valuable points.

In lesson 8, students were given the instruction sheet for the YouTube project (Figure 11), the good YouTuber guide, and instructions on using the editing application iMovie, Figure 12. Apple's iMovie was chosen because it was straightforward to use and was freely available on the students' iPads. For the rest of this lesson, learners planned their videos, and the teacher consulted and assisted each student individually while the other learners worked.

Figure 11
Instruction Sheet for the YouTube Movie Review

Figure 12
iMovie Basic Guide

The majority of the video filming was conducted as a homework task, thus allowing students to freely choose their video locations, adding to the authenticity of the

work. The next session, Lesson 9, was reserved for video editing in the classroom, with the teacher again consulting and aiding each student individually. Finally, in lesson 10 the videos were viewed collectively as a class. The interactivity and authenticity of this lesson were increased by uploading videos to YouTube; students then used the comments function on YouTube to write about the videos during the lesson as they watched each video. To manage this lesson, it was essential to upload the videos as 'unlisted' so that only those users given a link to students' work (the teacher and the other students) could access the videos. Finally, the students' work was graded and all videos were removed from YouTube upon completion of the project.

Analysis

The goal of this multimodal film review unit was to allow students to practice communicating a similar message through starkly different output methods: a formal written review and an informal spoken YouTube-style video. The process aimed to give students practice deploying the differing vocabulary, grammar, and communicative styles necessary to alter their register in each format. Finally, the implementation strived to fulfill these goals in a student-oriented manner by focusing on a topic of interest to many students and then allowing learners to choose their own materials within the topic.

Through the activities described in this paper, students were exposed to authentic language and associated cultural meanings in context. However, understanding these complex communications can be a linguistic challenge for the learner. Yet, by paying close attention to a limited number of generalized features in the movie review format, students could comprehend and enjoy movies in English. In addition, learners were able to incrementally improve linguistic skills such as vocabulary, text structure, and descriptive ability. This finding was apparent in students' written reviews as all the learners increased their competence in structuring reviews, expressing opinions, and using the target language.

Regarding the video section, students often repurposed language absorbed from the movies and the YouTubers. Learners incorporated learned phrases, gestures, and multi-modal techniques to communicate meaning effectively. Moreover, the students managed the transition from the rather formal written format to the relaxed YouTube style exceptionally well to produce two entirely different outputs. In addition, students were motivated not only by the content of self-selected movies but also by the transformational challenge of delivering essentially the same message in two contrasting styles.

Students wrote a short reflection on each unit as part of the Media English course. The movie unit was consistently one of the most popular with learners. Most students already enjoyed "Western" movies and many particularly enjoyed being allowed to choose their own content. Another positive theme students cited was the opportunity to learn vocabulary and communication styles not yet encountered in traditional textbooks and lessons. Moreover, many students assimilated this knowledge into their communicative repertoire, demonstrating, for the students, how effective movies can also be as autonomous language learning tools.

This unit was designed specifically for a Media English course, so it could most straightforwardly be incorporated into English courses focused on media or the arts. However, elements of this unit could be introduced across a range of language learning courses. For example, the film review section could be utilized in a writing class as it has a relatively well formalized structure and vocabulary. In a literature class, students could choose films adapted from novels or short stories and create reviews of each, with attention to the differing conventions and communicative devices employed. For more communicative lessons, students could focus on the production of the YouTube-style video as an engaging alternative to more traditional presentations. A unifying benefit,

though, in all of these potential use cases is the students' exposure to authentic language in the appropriate contexts. In addition, both the literature and the author's personal experience indicate that movies generate a tremendous amount of student engagement when used as language learning tools, particularly if learners themselves can select the films. Therefore, most English language courses could derive some benefit from deploying the motivational power of movies.

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