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Listening, Viewing and Imagination: Movies in EFL Classes

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Introduction

Interest in oral and aural language skills has gathered momentum in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) since audio-lingual method, which highlighted such linguistic production and perception, reached the peak of popularity in the 1960's. In the subsequent years, language educators have continuously dedicated increasing amount of time spent on listening and speaking in the classrooms. It is important to note that learners listen to the foreign language they are studying approximately twice as much as they speak it (van Duzer, 1997; Nunan, 1998); consequently, the role of listening in EFL learning can hardly be downplayed because the acquisition of this receptive skill becomes a vital prerequisite of good speaking ability. To promote the learners' mastery of listening skills, teachers need to carefully select and prepare a variety of quality teaching materials and aids to be used in a language laboratory, ensuring that the learners will gain optimum results from the listening lessons. A relatively simple (but frequently overlooked) way to achieve this is selecting commercial videos containing movies as teaching aids and then developing materials based on them.

Films in video format should not be regarded as merely a peripheral 'extra' in a listening class; on the contrary, they can function as the core content and become an integral part of the curriculum (Sommer, 2001). Appropriate, creative exploitation of movie videos can reveal their potentials in fostering the acquisition of listening skills (Eken, 2003); therefore, their use as instructional media in listening lessons should be encouraged due to at least four pedagogical values. Movies provide exposures to the real language uttered in authentic settings and the culture in which the foreign language is spoken (Stempleski, 1992; Telatnik and Kruse, 1982). In addition, they assist the learners' comprehension by enabling the learners to listen to exchanges and see such visual supports as facial expressions and gestures simultaneously (Allan, 1985; Sheerin, 1982), which may boost their insights into the topic of the conversations. Another benefit relates to motivation: films about issues that draw the learners' interest can positively affect their motivation to learn (Stempleski, 1992; Allan, 1985; Lonergan, 1984).

The present paper, therefore, aims to suggest a technique of presenting movies in EFL listening classes, which is based on years of successful application in a number of tertiary institutions in Indonesia. Such a technique not only allows undergraduate students to listen to authentic spoken language and at the same time view the accompanying paralinguistic information and sample the culture depicted there, but also encourage them to be more imaginative learners in constructing meaning from the verbal and visual inputs.

Prior to proceeding to a detailed account of this teaching technique, it is essential to establish a framework by reviewing two key notions: listening comprehension and imaginative education. This paper, consequently, consists of three parts. In the first part I address the basic concepts of listening comprehension in the teaching of English as a foreign language. This is followed by an explication of imagination as it relates to education. The final part is dedicated to the elaboration of the teaching technique that takes both into consideration.

Cognitive Processes in Listening Comprehension

Listening involves an active process of deciphering and constructing meaning from both verbal and non-verbal messages (Nunan, 1998). Thus, the label of passive skill applied to listening is, strictly speaking, a misnomer. This misunderstanding may stem from the fact that superficially learners seem to only sit in a language lab quietly, listen to pre-recorded dialogues, and write the answers to some questions related to the oral stimulus. However, van Duzer (1997) lists the following nine activities underlying the silent learning:

1. determine a reason for listening;
2. take the raw speech and deposits an image of it in short-term memory;
3. attempt to organize the information by identifying the type of speech event (conversation, lecture, radio ad) and the function of the message (persuade, inform, request);
4. predict information expected to be included in the message;
5. recall background information (schemata) to help interpret the message;
6. assign a meaning to the message;
7. checks that the message has been understood;
8. determine the information to be held in long-term memory;
9. delete the original form of the message that has been received into short term memory.

It is evident, then, that listening is not as 'passive' as it has been claimed to be as it demands a number of complicated processes on the part of the learners. These nine activities indicate the interaction of two subsuming cognitive processes: bottom-up (data-driven) and top-down (conceptually-driven).

The bottom-up processing involves constructing meaning from the smallest unit of the spoken language to the largest one in a linear mode (Nunan, 1998). Thus, the learners attempt to understand a spoken discourse by decoding a number of sounds to form words. Next, a nexus of words are linked to form phrases, which make up sentences. These sentences build a complete text, the meaning of which is then constructed by the listeners. In addition to the grammatical relationships, such suprasegmental phonemes as stress, rhythm and intonation also substantially contribute to this data-driven processing (van Duzer, 1997). Learners can be trained to perform this processing, for instance, by activities that require them to discriminate two sounds or distinguish rising and falling intonations.

The top-down processing, on the other hand, refers to interpreting meaning as intended by the speakers by means of schemata or structures of knowledge in the mind (Nunan, 1998). This view emphasizes the prominence of background knowledge already possessed by the learners in making sense of the information they hear. In the aural perception, the prior knowledge may facilitate their attempt to grasp the incoming information by relating the familiar with the new one, and significant lack of such knowledge can hamper their efforts to comprehend a particular utterance. It is, therefore, essential that learners are accustomed to performing this processing, usually by extracting the gist of the exchange they listen to.

There has been an erroneous tendency concerning the relative importance of the bottom-up and top-down processing in listening. Teachers frequently favour the latter more than the

former, laying emphasis on listening for the gist while virtually neglecting exercises on recognition of linguistic units like sounds, words, intonation, etc. Indeed the suggestion against straining for every sound or word contains some truth: the learners should avoid expending efforts so excessively to decode individual linguistic units that they fail to comprehend the whole discourse. However, this issue should be treated with caution as native speakers and foreign language learners differ with respect to listening ability (Rixon, 1986). Native speakers manage to derive the appropriate meaning without attending to every sound or word during aural perception because they, by all means, have advantages over non-native in terms of sensitivity in perceiving sounds, interpreting paralinguistic clues and possession of prior knowledge, as argued by Allan:

Native speakers are accustomed to making a lot of assumptions from a few clues. They don't need to hear every syllable—if they hear most of the stressed syllables that will be enough. They also use a range of visual clues.... In addition they draw on all kinds of background information they may have about that particular situation (1985: 72-73).

As a result, they hardly need any training in or exercises on sound discrimination or word recognition. Nonetheless, this does not mean foreign language learners can imitate these particular strategies in an exact manner. Due to the lack of the above abilities and knowledge on the part of the learners, listening in a foreign tongue may not be dominated by top-down processing. Bottom-up processing remains equally important in EFL listening (Wilson, 2003), and should be taught in adequate proportion compared to the top-down one.

This provides justifications that listening is not a passive language skill. Contrary to the misleading popular belief, comprehension through auditory channel requires some cognitive processes that interact actively in simultaneous manner. Nevertheless, cognition alone is insufficient in language learning. To attain better outcome, cognitive aspects of such learning ought to be merged with affective aspects, and this is where imagination can perform its function in joining the thinking-feeling dyad (Spencer, 2003).

Imaginative Learning

Johnson and Giorgis (2003) define imagination as an ability to create images, events, characters, and situation. Iannone (2001), however, prefers viewing imagination as a process of synthesizing cognitive understanding and aesthetic experience. Learning does not simply entail the acquisition of concepts, ideas or facts, but should arouse personal feelings as well, so that meanings—both the literal and, especially, the underlying ones—can be successfully derived at the end of the synthesis process.

One, therefore, should avoid considering imagination as simply an add-on in learning. As a matter of fact, imagination lies at the heart of learning (Spencer, 2003; Mock, 1970). It enables learners to explore the world of knowledge they encounter in order to discover meanings in divergent perspectives. Its absence will result in insipid intellectual pursuit, with activities which mainly consist of gathering and memorizing the existing facts. It is essential, therefore, that imagination be nurtured to ensure fruitful learning. To accomplish this task, teachers can encourage learners to exercise their imagination by utilizing the key question words proposed by Johnson and Giorgis (2003): 'what if'. Such questions will trigger a myriad of possibilities as the answers, and to arrive at these answers the learners are supposed to use their imagination as a means of visualizing possible realities they create (Mizell, 2004). The possibilities generated in this manner, nonetheless, should essentially remain attached to the realities to prevent imagination from "running wild" (Young, 2003:16) and further inhibiting meaningful learning. Young argues that guidance by educators in developing the imaginative faculty of the learners has a critical role to promote rational thoughts which can

suppress destructive behaviours. Osburg (2003) underlines this stance, describing the interlocking nature of imagination and knowledge in the following metaphor.

Imagination is essential because it *is* the rudder. It gives direction to thought about data. It gives order to data and creates what we call knowledge—an organized, sensible sum of human achievement, a landscape of processes and information that orders our minds. Thus, while data from the sense are the fount of knowledge, the imagination provides its shape and, ultimately, its substance (2003: 58).

Similarly, Whitehead (1967) also lays emphasis on the mutual relationship of these two concepts in education at university level. He believes that a university can be considered as performing its function properly only if it creates a conducive atmosphere which allows the acquisition of knowledge in an imaginative manner. In this educational institution learners need to realize that facts to be absorbed are embedded with the aforementioned possibilities, and it is their duty to explore the prospective dimensions and values of these facts by means of their imaginative power.

Obviously this is not a one-sided affair: the capability to imagine is besought on the part of not only the learners, but the teaching staff as well (Whitehead, 1967; Greene, 1978; Whyte, 2004). Mock (1970: 82) describes this mutuality as follows: “To educate the imagination we must teach imaginatively, and if the results of our teaching are to be creative our methods must be creative”. In line with this assertion, I have attempted to experiment with various methods of teaching listening to my EFL students, and the one that rarely fails involves the use of movies in video format. In the coming section I will explain a teaching technique that has proved effective in guiding my undergraduate students to develop their imaginative faculty.

Cultivating Imagination in Listening Classes

It has been mentioned at the beginning of the paper that films as a pedagogical tool in listening classes offer four benefits in the form of the authenticity of language, the provision of cultural context, the existence of visual supports, and the enhancement of motivation. In the present paper I shall demonstrate another advantage: they can be an excellent teaching media which to a large extent assists in stimulating the imaginative capability of the young minds.

Although presenting full-length movies in a classroom invites objections mainly due to the time constraint, after repeated practice I am confident in maintaining that this does not necessarily become a significant obstacle. In tertiary institutions where I have implemented this teaching technique, one session of listening lesson lasts for 100 minutes. Given this condition, apparently showing one entire movie (approximately 90-115 minutes long) and doing the relevant exercises cannot be completed in a single session, but this can be easily overcome by splitting the presentation into two sessions. As a matter of fact, such a division of time can cater for invaluable opportunities for the learners to exercise their power of imagination if we—the learning facilitators—are imaginative in assisting the learners to construct knowledge from the aural perception.

The movie can be presented in two modes: with or without subtitles. The decision to include the subtitles or otherwise in a movie presentation relies on the complexity of the story and the delivery of the speech. If the theme and the plot appear to be too complicated to apprehend (for example, *Dead Poets Society*), it is a wise choice to show the subtitles as this will save the learners from an arduous task, i.e. concentrating on the theme while at the same time grappling with the language. In addition to the complexity of the content, several attributes of the utterances also determines the results of such a decision, for instance, the density of the language and the rate and accent of delivery. Characters who articulate excessively unfamiliar

technical terms (such as legal jargons in *Music Box*), words with a particular accent (*A Walk in Clouds*), or fast speech (*Next Stop Wonderland*) can possibly hamper the learner's efforts to comprehend, so I prefer to provide subtitles in their first language when showing such movies.

To guide them in comprehending ideas from the oral input as well as strengthening their imaginative faculty, I devise a handout to accompany the movie viewing. This handout comprises three parts and reflects the stages that they undergo during the lessons: previewing, while-viewing, and postviewing (Allan, 1984; Underwood, 1989). A description of each stage will be elaborated below.

Previewing

It is a common practice in instructions on language decoding (including listening) that at this beginning stage the teacher spends a sufficient amount of time helping the learners build the appropriate schemata to facilitate comprehension (van Duzer, 1997). This conceptually-driven style of teaching are believed to enable the learners to provide a 'hook' that relates the knowledge he already possesses and the one to be acquired, making the acquisition occur more smoothly.

Generally the previewing stage consists of two activities, namely, introducing the theme of the movie and preteaching the key vocabulary (Allan, 1985; Tomalin, 1986; Sheerin, 1982). Working within this framework, at the beginning of the session I briefly describe the theme that underlies the whole plot of the movie, and also the presence or the absence of subtitles in the mother tongue.

Afterwards, I administer a worksheet and an answer sheet, and have the learners scan the items in the worksheet for a few a minutes to familiarize themselves with the learning activities to be carried out before, during and after viewing the movie. If the film includes subtitles, the learners proceed to the while-viewing stage and do not need to discuss the keywords because lexical items will be a part of the while-viewing activities. However, if the subtitles are absent, I review a number of keywords from the movie to cater for a scaffold that will assist them in the comprehension later. Otherwise, the learners need to expend extra effort to understand what is happening in the movie and may give up disheartened if they fail to do so.

Rather than simply telling them the meaning of these keywords, I prefer presenting them in sentences and asking the students to perform intelligent guessing to figure out the meaning of each on the basis of the context. Retention is expected to be better if they discover the meaning themselves. The following is a sample of previewing items in the worksheet for the movie entitled *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

Guess the meaning of the underlined words below, using the context as a clue.

1. When his sister broke his favorite ashtray, he went berserk.
2. This is my father's daytime number. You could call him in his office by dialling this number.
3. The downtown area is always busy because there are a lot of shops and offices there.

The students are supposed to do the vocabulary building exercise orally. I ask them to brainstorm about the meaning, giving them a chance to express the inferred synonym or

explain the definition to the rest of the class. It is the learners who construct the meaning, and my role in this activity is to provide feedback on the accuracy of their inference.

Interestingly, Egan (2003) challenges such top-down style of instruction, not only at the beginning of the lesson but also at any point of it. He questions the adequacy of learning which starts with the knowledge that the students already possesses, expressing his concern about its possibility of confining learning merely to the existing knowledge instead of the new one to be discovered. While still recognizing the critical role of prior knowledge, he advises that more opportunity be given to the students to develop their imagination. This can be appropriately applied to the teaching of listening by having them imagine possibilities immediately after the discussion on keyword. To stimulate their imagination, I usually throw a question that can prompt various possibilities. As an illustration, the above movie, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, depicts a schoolboy who takes a day off from school and spends this single day creatively in various ways; therefore, in addition to explaining the theme and preteaching the keywords, I ask them "What would you do if you had a chance of taking a day off from school?" as a previewing activity. Such a question proves to be quite effective in inviting them to explore possible creative activities they would do in such a situation.

While-viewing

Immediately after the previewing stage, I engage them in the core activity: viewing the movie. While doing so, they are supposed to answer some items in the worksheet in written form. Again, the presence of subtitles in the film determines the types of questions to ask in the worksheet. If the film is shown *with* subtitles in the mother tongue, I ask them some questions to check their comprehension and also some others to improve their lexical knowledge. Below is a sample of worksheet items for the movie *Next Stop Wonderland* to exemplify these two types of questions.

A. VOCABULARY

In the restaurant

1. What are the English expressions for these:
 - a. Menawarkan tumpangan
 - b. Kalau hilang, ya sudah

In Kevin's room

2. What expression did Kevin use to ask his friend to speak with lower voice?

In the aquarium

3. Frank asked Allen to e_____ the fish.

B. COMPREHENSION

1. What was the relationship between Lewis Castleton, the writer of "Heart Needs Home", and Erin?
2. Why did Erin often point to words in books randomly?

If the subtitles in the first language is not shown, the items usually include comprehension questions only, as illustrated in the following excerpt of worksheet for the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

At home

1. Why did Ferris call Cameron that morning?
2. What were the tips given by Ferris's father over the phone?
 - Take a _____
 - Wrap a _____ on his head.
 - Make _____
 - Get a _____

At school

3. What did the school's nurse tell Sloane?

In Cameron's garage

4. 1961 Ferrari 250GT California. Why was the car special?
5. Why did Cameron's father always check the mileage?

Each item consists of a brief description of the scene to refer to (written in italics) and one or more questions to be answered. The description of the scene assists the learners to direct their attention to a particular spot in the movie which is related to the question(s) being asked. For instance, the label of '*in the restaurant*' above item number 1 in the worksheet for *Next Stop Wonderland* prompts the students to become more alert when they see the scene of a restaurant on the screen and know immediately what specific information to look for, i.e. the English translation of *menawarkan tumpangan* (offer a ride) and *kalau hilang, ya sudah* (Lost is lost). The item is intended to increase their vocabulary size by encouraging them to match the Indonesian subtitles with what the film character utters in English.

The comprehension questions are written in similar fashion—questions preceded by a clue of the scene—unless the questions need to be answered by grasping the ideas and/or inferring the answers from the entire movie. In the latter case, the description of the scene is not required.

In spite of the slight difference in the content of questions for the films with and without subtitles, they are presented in approximately the same way. The following describe the complete activities to be done during the viewing stage. First, allow the students one minute or two for a quick review of the scenes and the questions written in the worksheet, so that they have an idea of the scenes to watch in the entire movie and can focus their attention on the information to seek. Next, play the movie, and after each scene mentioned in the worksheet pause for 15 to 60 seconds, depending on the length of the required answer. During this pause, have them supply a correct, brief answer. Occasionally, after viewing a scene once the students still find it quite difficult to recognize the words spoken by the characters or understand their exchange, and request a repetition of that particular scene. In dealing with such a situation, I should emphasise that this exercise aims at enabling and guiding them to comprehend and construct meaning from utterances in the target language, rather than testing their listening ability. As a consequence, they deserve a second chance to view the scene in order to promote better comprehension.

You may be wondering by now what is so imaginative about asking the above objective-type comprehension or vocabulary questions, as they seem to offer the learners little freedom to explore the possible answers. It is true these items mainly measure the learners' EFL listening competence: the exercise that is intended to stimulate their imaginative capability is given in the middle of while-viewing activities. I have mentioned earlier in this paper that due to time constraint the film has to be presented in two sessions, and this split turns out to be an advantageous point in the lesson rather than otherwise. I always finish the first session by stopping the tape or the disc when the story in the movie seemingly gets bleak and

unpromising, then have the learners predict how the story will end. To illustrate, I press the 'stop' button of the video player in the following scenes:

- *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*: after Cameron Fry crashes his father's car out of the garage and severely damages it.
- *A Walk in the Clouds*: after Victoria Aragon turns the bedroom light on and Paul Sutton watches the light from a distance in the vineyard.
- *Chocolat*: after Anouk accidentally drops the container made of clay, and begs for an apology from Vianne, agreeing to leave.
- *Music Box*: after Ann Talbot discovers the old pictures hidden in the music box.
- *Labyrinth*: after Sarah finds out she has very little time to get her brother back before the clock strikes thirteen times.

They should write their predictions briefly (usually not more than 5 sentences) on the answer sheet. To do so, they invariably exercise their imaginative power to figure out what events will be likely to occur ahead at the end of the movie based on the existing clues. It is definitely an interesting experience for me to find how remotely different one prediction from another can be. It even takes me by surprise to learn that some of my students' predictions often resemble the unexpected twist in the movie's ending.

This activity involving imagination closes the first session. In the next listening session (usually the following week), I play the rest of the tape/disc and have them continue answering the rest of the items.

Postviewing

Upon completing the while-viewing activities, they proceed to the postviewing ones. By this time they have already seen the end of the movie and can verify the written result of their imagination against the actual ending. Despite differences that may come up between these two, all of the students' work must be appreciated. The exact or approximate match between what the learners have imagined and what actually occurs in the movie does not matter much. It is the process of arriving at the predicted ending which should be acknowledged.

After reviewing the results of the prediction briefly, the learners are engaged in the next postviewing activity, namely, examining the diversity across cultures. If the film happens to be rich of cross-cultural materials to dig up, such as *A Walk in the Clouds* where the Mexican culture encounters the American one, I construct an item that directs the learners to delve into the distinct manners in which two cultures treat the same issue in the movie. Otherwise, I have the students identify how the target culture in the film differs significantly from their own culture. To facilitate the students' attempt to contrast the cultures, I usually devise a table that can assist them in recognizing the differences. On the next page is an example of such an item taken from the worksheet for *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. This item is designed to allow the learners to contrast the American culture—where all the acts and events in the movie take place—and the Indonesian culture in which they have lived and been raised. The result indicates that most of them can accurately describe how dissimilar the two cultures view parent-children relationship, teacher-students relationship, friendship, and other social issues.

It is strongly recommended that this activity of contrasting be followed by an assertion from the teacher that cultures simply differ and none is superior to the others. This is especially vital as some learners may tend to hold an inaccurate opinion that their own culture is "right" and "full of politeness", whereas the others are "wrong" and "full of unacceptable values". They should be made aware that diversity among cultures must be highly valued and respected, and such appreciation is extremely beneficial when they are learning a foreign language as language is inseparable from the culture where it is spoken.

You have seen some activities or events that reflect the American culture in the movie, and they are quite different in Indonesia. In the left column, list these typically American activities or events. In the right column, write the equal or similar ones in Indonesia.

American culture	Indonesian culture

Conclusion

Movies turn out to be an effective teaching device to develop the EFL learners' listening skills and stimulate their imagination simultaneously. Their capacity to arouse the learners' motivation and their potential to engage the learners in a variety of fruitful activities related to aural perception in the target language can scarcely be denied. After class, my students often personally express their great interest in the movies I have selected for them and the ways they are exploited to improve listening skills. Additionally, many of them report the benefits they attain from making unrestrained efforts to predict how a particular movie ends. They admit their curiosity keeps high while waiting for the subsequent session in the following week, and—when they finally do watch the ending—feel amused irrespective of the relevance between the predicted and the actual ending. On the whole, I have received encouraging feedbacks from the learners and therefore suggest that movies be utilized in the teaching of EFL listening because of their pedagogical merits.

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