

# Using Movies in a Content-Based Communication Course: Rationalizations and Implementations

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## Abstract

Recent studies have explored ways of using movies as an effective way to boost learners' overall comprehension and listening ability. A large majority of these studies have investigated the effectiveness of using both L1 and L2 subtitles. The outstanding finding of most studies is that subtitles are a valuable aid for EFL learners. In addition to the presentation of information through pictures and sound, the textual support from subtitles improves learners' overall comprehension ability by enabling them to visually confirm the heard message. In this paper, reviews of some of these current studies will be followed by a presentation of practical uses for movies in an EFL communication course.

Keywords: TEFL methods; listening comprehension; movies; L1 / L2 subtitles

## 1 . Introduction

At the beginning of every academic year, I ask students to fill out an information card which I use to learn more about the new students. One question, "What would you like to do in this class?" is always included on the cards. Unfailingly, many of the students comment that they want to watch movies in class. For a long time, I wondered how movies could possibly be used in a conversation class. The very nature of movies seems to eliminate the need for conversation ( and teacher intervention ). They are, after all, something that one watches in silence, and derives their own personal interpretation from. However, students' consistent requests and my own growing curiosity led me to search for movies that might be adopted, and to come up with ways to use those movies in the conversation course curriculum.

Movies not only allow the teacher to introduce variety and reality into the classroom, but discussions based on movie content allow students to bring their own background knowledge and experiences to the discussion ( Baddock, 1996 ). Furthermore, almost everyone simply finds watching films pleasurable and can enjoy talking about them. From a motivational standpoint, it seems that movies are the perfect choice for use in a language learning classroom. However, this very environment assumes that both instruction and learning take place. Thus, the burden is on the teacher to find ways to make movies an educationally viable platform for instruction. This medium provides not only rich aural input, but also, the use of subtitles can expose learners to visual ( text ) input as well. It is the latter type of input which this paper will address.

## 2 . Review of Research

Out of the many studies related to movie use in the EFL context,

those which investigate different methods of using movie subtitles and their effectiveness are of the greatest interest and relevance to the current study. While many studies investigate the use of L2 subtitles, very few have examined the benefits of L1 subtitles. A summary and review of the relevant studies is presented below.

Lambert, Boehler, and Sidoti ( 1981 ) studied the effects of using various combinations of L1 and L2 subtitles and dialogue with fifth and sixth grade elementary learners studying French as a second language. In their experiment, they used recordings of French language radio broadcasts along with a video screen to show the spoken dialogue ( in subtitles ). Out of nine different "conditions" for L1 and L2 dialogue/script combinations, the most favorable were those in which the L1 was made available through either the written script or the spoken dialogue. One condition, "Reversed Subtitling-L2" revealed unexpected results. When learners listened to the dialogue in their native language ( English ) and read the L2 ( French ) in the subtitles, they performed surprisingly well on an L2 post-test. The researchers hypothesized that this was because the learners were able to grasp the overall message in their L1 with little effort, and were then able to see in the subtitles how to formulate the same expressions in the L2. This study goes a long way toward proving that L1 auditory input can be processed easily and quickly, thus allowing the learner to use the L2 text as a means to confirm comprehension of the target language. Normal subtitling, in a sense, simply gets in the way; textual processing in the L1 tends to inhibit processing of the more difficult L2 auditory message. The researchers suggest that L1 auditory input enables the learner to use more efficient top-down processing of the L2 textual input. They go on to further suggest that learners who use television programs and movies would benefit much

more greatly simply by being able to see the L2 script instead of having it translated into their L1.

In another study on the effectiveness of different subtitle/dialogue combinations, Yoshino, Kano, and Akahori (2000) showed short music video clips to groups of Japanese college and university students then asked them to write down what they remembered. Compared to the Lambert, et. al. (1981) study, there were much fewer subtitle/dialogue combinations tested, and the effects of reverse subtitling were not tested at all. Furthermore, in contrast to the Lambert study, which tested for comprehension of text messages, the Yoshino study mainly tested for accuracy and memory recall. This study did show that English captions do improve the degree of accuracy and ability of learners to recall information. Students given only the English audio or given English audio and English subtitles performed better than those who were given L1 subtitles along with English audio. Their findings contribute to the idea that L1 subtitles inhibit the effective processing of L2 audio input. The authors suppose that students needed to translate from Japanese to English when processing difficult materials. It would have been instructive if this study had additionally tested for the effectiveness of L2 subtitles with L1 audio input.

A study by Markham (1989) also investigated the effectiveness of L2 subtitles. While this study used only a limited number of subjects who were exposed to the subtitles for a short amount of time, both low- and high-level students benefited from the use of L2 subtitles. Markham noted that, not only is access to L2 subtitles useful for aiding learners' comprehension of technical video materials, but that their use offers promise for simultaneously improving their listening and reading comprehension.

Hirose and Kamei (1993) studied the effects of L2 subtitles on a group of first and second year Japanese university students. For three groups of proficiency levels, they compared the differences of students who were exposed to the audio and visual input of a movie segment with students who were exposed to the audio, visual, and textual input of L2 subtitles. The subjects were tested on their ability to infer linguistic meaning as well as perceive emotional meaning. The latter was tested in order to isolate the effects of non-linguistic comprehension. Post-test results showed that, for general comprehension, students who were exposed to the L2 subtitles did significantly better over those who did not have the benefit of the textual input. However, a word-level completion section of the post-test revealed clear differences in the performance of the different proficiency groups. The lower and intermediate groups exposed to subtitles showed more improvement over the learners who were not, while there was no significant difference between the two

high-proficiency groups. The authors attributed the similar results to a better listening proficiency for the high level learners. In an interesting, but perhaps predictable outcome, there was no significant difference between the scores of the emotional perception test, neither between the different proficiency levels, nor between the groups who read the subtitles and those who did not. Unfortunately, no substantial conclusions can be taken from this research. Any potential shortcomings in the use of L2 subtitles ("captions did not perform miracles after all") cannot be soundly demonstrated in this rather limited study.

From these and other studies, it is apparent that L2 subtitles can greatly aid learners' comprehension of spoken dialogue in movies. While L2 subtitles appear to be the most helpful, it is not always easy to find movies that have closed captions in the target language. Sometimes it is simply not practical to limit the selection of movies to those which have L2 subtitles. With this in mind, I wish to next describe a strategy for using L1 subtitles when there is no other alternative available.

### 3 . Classroom Application

During the second semester of a second-year English conversation course, *Pay It Forward* (Warner Brothers, 2000) an American movie, is used as the main content. The movie is about the noble idea of paying a favor forward instead of paying it back. Rather than helping a person who has helped you, you have to do something good for three different people. The main character in the movie is an 11-year old boy who is given an assignment by his Social Studies teacher. The assignment is to think of a way to change the world, then put the idea into action. The boy decides to help three people by doing something for them that they cannot do by themselves. Then, after helping them, he asks them to help three different people. Those people will then do good things for three more people, and so on. The boy believes that, by paying a favor forward, each person has the power to make the world a better place. His efforts change not only the lives of the people around him, but also those of a growing pyramid of people completely unknown to him. The movie was chosen because of this unusual, but useful social message.

As many students have never seen *Pay It Forward*, it is shown once in its entirety, then throughout the second semester, selected scenes are shown again. For each scene, various activities are done to improve listening comprehension, teach vocabulary (including slang and idioms), have discussions about the content, check comprehension of the script, and create conversations based on the content and script dialogue. Thus, the movie is used for two main purposes: to increase vocabulary usage and recognition, and to

introduce content for discussions and conversations. Consequently, the criteria for selecting a scene to use in class is based on its degree of richness in one or both of these areas.

To prepare students for the target language and content in each scene, vocabulary building exercises are distributed the week before a particular scene is watched. These exercises are divided into those which are done before a scene is watched, and those which are done while watching a scene. Usually, discussion questions about the content are distributed after watching a particular scene; however, on occasion, questions about the content are distributed before watching.

In order to create some continuity between classes, a regular pattern of activities is done in all classes. While there are variations, the flow of the lessons is typically done as outlined below:

- 1 . Vocabulary homework is checked. Any necessary explanation of the words and phrases is given.
- 2 . Students practice the pronunciation of the words and phrases they will be exposed to in the scene they are about to watch.
- 3 . A 5-7 minute long scene from the movie is shown twice.
- 4 . The script for the scene, written in English and Japanese, is distributed to the students. They are instructed to read it out loud with a partner.
- 5 . Any exercises from the vocabulary homework which students are to answer while watching the scene are checked and discussed.
- 6 . With script in hand, students are given additional comprehension and discussion questions. These are done in small groups. The teacher spends time with each group, pointing them toward areas in the script which will help them answer the questions, and participates in their discussion of the questions.
- 7 . For the remaining 30-40 minutes of class, students do a conversation activity which is based on a portion of the script, or related in some way to the content of the scene.
- 8 . In the following week, further expansion of the current scene is done, or a new scene is watched.

This pattern of activities is used for nine selected scenes from the movie. There is always a difficulty in deciding which scenes to select and which vocabulary to select from the script to teach to the students. Moreover, with class time being limited to only 90 minutes once a week, there is a danger of not allowing for ample conversation practice. Because the course is designed to be a “content-based” conversation class, often discussions on about themes from the movie take precedence over everyday conversation. While sometimes this does not meet with some students’ expectations for the course (discussed below ) it is still seen to be a valid way to use movies to

introduce a variety of content into the conversation course curriculum.

#### 4 . Testing Listening Comprehension via L1 Subtitles

While studies have shown the benefits of using L2 subtitles ( Hirose and Kamei, 1993; Lambert, Boehler, and Sidoti, 1981; Markham, 1989 ) there are still many ways to make practical and effective use of L1 subtitles. In the case of this study, the movie that was used in class was taped from a satellite movie channel in Japan. So, naturally, Japanese subtitles appeared at the bottom of the screen. While it would have been possible to cover the subtitles with a piece of paper, this was not done for several reasons. It would hide about one quarter of the picture and, perhaps more importantly, students would know that the subtitles were there. It was thought that this would have made them want to see the Japanese subtitles even more. So, a plan was devised to capitalize on the Japanese words rather than hiding them.

Most Japanese students of English know that subtitle translations are not always accurate. Yet, they often do not realize the reason for this. Subtitles change as the view changes on the screen and, naturally, as the dialogue progresses forward. Due to the limitations imposed on showing a printed translation of the spoken dialogue in a short time, the translator often has to summarize an extended stretch of speech. In the process, some words are necessarily omitted. However, not all words are cut. Often, many salient words are translated quite well in the subtitles. It is these words that I wanted to capitalize on. In the process, I hoped that students would gain an awareness that they could pick up new English words and phrases any time that they watch a movie by reading the subtitles and listening carefully.

It was important to carefully prepare the exercises, called “E to J” ( English to Japanese translation ) by looking at a transcription of the dialogue and selecting the words that had been translated well into Japanese. Furthermore, I did not want to choose words that would be too obvious for students. There needed to be some challenge to the exercise. Another quality that I looked for when selecting the E to J vocabulary was that they should be used in a new or unfamiliar way. For example, in one scene, when trying to get his mother to hurry up and leave to go on a date, the boy said, “Okay, okay, okay” many times. This word has a great many meanings in English and can be translated into Japanese in many different ways. In this case, it was translated as *ii kara, hayaku* [All right, all right. Hurry up]. The translation was very good at conveying the exact feeling of the English expression. These seemed to be the perfect kinds of

expressions to use for this exercise. Not only are these types of words and expressions fairly easy to hear, but they can also enable students to see how they are said in natural Japanese.

The E to J exercise, in combination with the vocabulary homework, give students thorough support for understanding the vocabulary before and while watching the scenes. By the time that they receive the printed English script, they have already encountered many of the words and taken the first step towards actually acquiring them. The subsequent discussion and conversation activities are designed to explore the topics which the vocabulary relate to and put the words into use.

### 5 . Student Response

In order to find out the students’ opinions about the activities done while watching *Pay It Forward*, a survey was given ( Table 1 ) in January 2003. The questions cover a variety of areas, but they are all designed to better determine whether the activities were useful from the students’ viewpoint. I explained to the students that their comments would help me know what I should keep the same or do differently if I were to use the same materials in the following academic year, so honest and thoughtful answers would be appreciated.

The combined number of students who answered the survey was

53. The students were asked to rate each item on a continuum: 1( not at all ); 2( somewhat ); 3( enough ); 4( very high / much ) Items 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7 were aimed at eliciting opinions about specific types of activities done in conjunction with the movie, while items 2, 3, 8, and 9 focused on material design and management of viewing the scenes. As has already been mentioned, time constraints allow for each scene to be watched two times at most during one class period. I was especially interested in finding out how students felt about this. A discussion of the results follows below.

While the overall response to each survey item is generally positive ( with the highest percentage of answers being either ‘enough’ or ‘very much / high’ ), some items received a low rating ( either ‘not at all’ or ‘somewhat’ ). This led me to reflect on the usefulness of these activities and to find reasons for why some students were not satisfied with them.

For two practically identical questions, 1b ( a perceived gain in conversation ability ) and 6 ( Do you think there was enough conversation practice ? ), 34% and 28% percent of students responded ‘somewhat’ respectively. This shows that a fairly large number of students felt that they had not gotten enough chances to practice conversation. In response to items 7c ( usefulness of questions about themes in the movie )and 7d( usefulness of questions about their experiences ), 25% and 23% percent of students

Table 1. Survey of Attitudes towards Instructional Tasks

	1	2	3	4
1 . What did you gain by watching Pay It Forward ?				
a. Increased knowledge of everyday expressions and vocabulary	0 *	13	51	36
b. Improved conversation ability	2	34	55	9
c. Improved listening ability	0	4	55	42
d. Better understanding of American culture	4	25	38	34
2 . How helpful was watching the complete movie at the beginning of the semester ?	0	19	40	42
3 . How useful was it to see the Japanese translation along with the English script ?	0	8	36	57
4 . Did the vocabulary homework help prepare you to understand each scene ?	0	6	40	55
5 . Was listening for English words while watching the subtitles ( E to J ) a useful exercise ?	0	8	45	47
6 . Do you think there was enough conversation practice ?	2	28	45	25
7 . Which exercises were useful to you ?				
a. Using expressions from the movie	0	9	45	45
b. Questions about scenes in the movie	0	15	60	25
c. Questions about themes in the movie	0	25	58	17
d. Questions about your experiences	0	23	64	13
8 . Was watching each scene 2 times enough ?	2	11	32	55
9 . What do you think about the number of scenes that we watched ? ( Choose one )				
a. We watched too many scenes	11			
b. We watched just the right amount	70			
c. We should have watched more scenes	19			

\* Figures given in percentages.

responded 'somewhat' respectively. Again, enough students gave this a low rating to make me review the need for the inclusion of certain types of questions in the discussion activities. Finally, one more area which received a fairly low rating was item 1d ( a perceived gain in understanding American culture ) 25% of the students gave a low 'somewhat' for this item also.

While it might be easy to say that 'you can't please everyone all of the time' and let the overall high responses speak for themselves, feedback such as this does encourage one to find ways to improve instructional methods and teaching materials in order to more effectively use movies in a conversation class. One outstanding concern about using movies to teach conversation( not *discussion* ) is that, if the instructor is concerned about students understanding the spoken words and the content of the scenes, then there is an overwhelming amount of things to explain and discuss before introducing free conversation activities. There is constant difficulty in trying to link the themes and expressions used in the movie with activities that will elicit natural free conversations. Furthermore, there may well be a conflict between the teacher's goals and the students' goals. My goal was to introduce themes in the movies and use these for discussions and teaching vocabulary that students would encounter in the scenes. It was hoped that students would benefit from exposure to American culture, but a certain percentage students did not feel so. Even though there are many students that are excited at the use of movies in their classes, some students may well feel that movies are an entertainment mode, not one through which learning takes place. This may act as an affective barrier and inhibit such students from benefiting from even the most well designed and carefully thought out activities.

The results from the survey have been subsequently used in an attempt to improve the following years' course. Most activities were completely redesigned. Questions were simplified, re-worded, or simply omitted. Perhaps the most difficult thing has been to "sacrifice" the amount of explanation done before and after watching the scenes which had been used to guide students toward a deeper understanding of the themes in the movie. Instead, greater emphasis has been placed on using the expressions from each scene in a way which students can use in guided conversations. Discussions about movie content can often require careful thought by the students and, if time were not an important consideration, could continue to be used. Such activities have been dropped, however, in order to allow students to take what they can from the movie and try to put it into action.

## 6 . Conclusion

In light of the current research on the effectiveness of using movies as an EFL instructional medium, some type of textual support is useful for helping students better comprehend the spoken dialogue. While the studies outlined above researched the effects of L2 subtitles, this paper, in contrast, has attempted to show the benefits of L1 subtitles. Survey results showed that student response to such a method was positive. It is possible, then, to make use of native language subtitles when no other choice is available. Yet, with the recent availability and reduced cost of DVDs, this medium should be explored more as a way to easily use L1 subtitles as an aid to movie comprehension. Chun( 1996 )lists many advantages of using DVDs. The features which are particularly relevant to their use in language classrooms are the capability of many subtitle channels, interactive features such as freeze frame, slow motion, and multiple movie endings, and durability. While cost of players and the discs themselves might be prohibitive for teachers at schools with limited budgets, in recent years, prices of both have been reduced to the point where they are competitive with VHS players and tapes. It is now more easily possible to explore the validity of reverse subtitling with the help of DVDs. More research needs to be done with Japanese learners of EFL to determine the effectiveness of using L2 subtitles as aid in the comprehension of spoken dialogue and recall of expressions presented through visual media.

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