The Advantages of Using Films in English Classes

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Films are one of the popular teaching materials among EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers in Japan. Quite a few textbooks using films as a primary material have been published. However, there are a number of language teachers who are not fully aware of the effectiveness of using films; some teachers are even skeptical about the pedagogical effectiveness of this approach. This paper discusses theoretical background and research findings regarding using films in order to inspiring more and more language teachers to utilize films in their classes.

1. Introduction

Teachers of English as a foreign language encounter a multitude of challenges often different from their counterparts who teach English as a second language. Among these challenges, due to the fact that EFL learners do not need English skills in their daily lives, motivating learners and helping them enjoy learning English are by far the most demanding [15]. To overcome this problem, English teachers have used various materials and activities, such as reading newspapers, listening songs and radio programs, role playing of conversations. Among these, films are one of the most popular materials. In fact, there is even a teachers' organization called ATEM (Association of Teaching English through Movies) in Japan. However, there are many English teachers who do not understand the effectiveness of using films or how to effectively utilize them for language teaching and learning. Some of them use films simply to make their class fun for their students. In addition, there are teachers who are skeptical about the pedagogical effectiveness of this approach. Therefore, this paper discusses the theoretical background and research findings regarding using films in language classes. The first section describes the psychological effects of using films on students in English classes. The second section discusses whether using films is effective for learners to improve their language skills.

2. Psychological effects

Using films has many advantages which include helping learners to have positive attitudes for learning the target language and enriching the environment in which they learn. In this section, a rationale for the psychological effects of using films is discussed, including stimulating learners' motivation, increasing interest in the target culture, facilitating learner autonomy, lowering their affective filters, and maintaining their concentration.

2.1 Motivation for learning language

As many educators and researchers argue, motivation is one of the most important factors in learning a language [11], [19], [37], [54], [63], [65]. Motivation has been categorized into two types: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. "Intrinsically motivated behaviors are aimed at bringing about certain internally rewarding consequences, namely, feelings of competence and self-determination" ([18]. p. 23). On the other hand, extrinsically motivated behaviors are those behaviors which are performed in anticipation of some external rewards or to avoid being punished [19], [20]. Brown [11] contends that learners who are intrinsically motivated in learning a language have a stronger drive and are more persistent in their linguistic endeavor. However, in EFL contexts, it is very challenging for teachers

to attempt to instill this intrinsic motivation to learn English because most EFL learners do not have many opportunities to use the language, nor is English a necessary language for learners to use in order to function in their daily lives [54]. In Japan, the majority of EFL learners study English for the purpose of entering a university or seeking employment and promoting themselves in the work place [37], [54]. The fact that most Japanese learners are only extrinsically and instrumentally motivated to learn English may be the cause of their losing interest and motivation in learning English upon entering a university or meeting their professional goals [6], [9].

In addition to the two types of motivation, Gardner and Lambert [26] have identified and defined two other factors which drive learners to learn language, which they refer to as integrative and instrumental orientation. Instrumental orientation refers to "the purposes of language study reflect the more utilitarian value of linguistic achievement, such as getting ahead in one's occupation" (ibid, p. 3). Conversely, those students who are instrumentally oriented desire "to learn more about the other cultural community because he is interested in it in an open-minded way, to the point of eventually being accepted as a member of that other group" (ibid, p. 3). In the research they conducted, Gardner and Lambert found that integrative orientation is superior to instrumental orientation for language acquisition. Furthermore, in his study of Japanese students residing in the U.S., Cowan [17] showed that, regardless of the length of residence, those students who were integratively motivated to learn English became more orally proficient than those who were not motivated integratively. Therefore, according to Gardner [25], integrative motivation is the key affective factor in second language acquisition (SLA). However, Japanese learners, especially, high school students, tend to be instrumentally oriented. According to Kamada [37], this orientation that many Japanese learners have may be attributed to the university entrance examination that Japanese students are subjected to, which reshapes their perception and motives for learning English.

2.2　Using films to motivate learners

Some scholars argue that using films helps in motivating learners [5], [45], [47]. First of all, films are intrinsically enjoyable for people [47], and King [39] contends that films are more interesting materials for learners than videos which are designed for ESL or EFL learners. In fact, I have used videos designed for ESL learners in my class, but my students did not show as much interests or motivation as when I showed commercially available feature films intended for native English speakers. Moreover, Normand [60] claims that frequent use of audio-visual aids can stimulate or enhance student motivation. Shinozaki [69] points out that the characteristics of films, which provide cross-cultural context with a combination of audio and visual input, helps stimulate learners' integrative motivation.

2.3　Interest in the target culture

The importance of enhancing learners' cultural awareness in language teaching has been argued by many educators [11], [42], [62], [76]. Using films in the EFL classroom can help learners gain interest in the target culture, and, simultaneously, motivate them to learn the language. Dörnyei and Csizér [21] argue that helping learners become familiar with the target language culture is one of the important commandments for motivating language learners. Films are motivating because they are rich in resources for the learning and acquisition of the target culture [75]. Stempleski [71] points out that "through viewing films and other programs intended for native speakers, students are able to see how people in the target language culture live － their values customs, clothing, food, and how the people in that culture interact with one another" (p. 4). As films can provide a variety of cultural topics [75], through the discussions of the cultural similarities and differences, students' interests in the target culture and people are raised, which can be a springboard for students to develop the motivation to learn the target language [4].

Furthermore, using materials which provide cultural aspects of the target language allows students to gain sociocultural competence, which refers to the ability to understand the norm of the target culture

[32]. This is also an important factor for learners when communicating with the people of the target culture. The lack of this competence could cause a breakdown in communication between the interlocutors. Hinkel [32] contends that "to become proficient and effective communicators, learners need to attain second language (L2) sociocultural competence" (p. 443). Additionally, Hymes [33] emphasizes the need for learning culture as an essential element of language education because it represents the values and speech norms of a community which learners must know in order to communicative effectively. Furthermore, not being familiar with and following the accepted norms of appropriateness heightens social disparities and inequalities [33].

2.4 A sense of achievement

There are additional advantages for using films in motivating learners of English. Understanding the contents and language used in films can be helpful for students to feel a sense of accomplishment [44]. Stempleski [71] points out that films provide authentic spoken language and students can experience a real feeling of accomplishment when they are able to understand authentic language. She further argues that students are "motivated to seek out and understand other authentic materials when they are able to understand the real thing" ([71], p. 3). Language used in films is intended for native speakers, and it is more difficult for learners to understand than graded or simplified language in their textbooks or videos designed for English learners. When students feel that they are able to understand the English spoken in the real world, this permits them to believe that understanding and communicating with English speakers is not beyond their abilities. This sense of knowing that they can understand authentic language may propel learners to try out their language outside the classroom, in the real world.

2.5 Learner autonomy

According to Benson & Voller [7], learner autonomy refers to "situations in which learners study entirely on their own"; "a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning"; "inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional educa-

tion; "the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning"; and "the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning" (p. 1). Learner autonomy is also important for successful language learning [45], and films are helpful for students to attain autonomy [44]. Because most students prefer authentic feature films [40], there is a great possibility that they will voluntarily use this medium for self-directed learning outside the classroom. As most Japanese households have VCRs and DVD players, and the videos and DVDs are available at low costs, it is easy for students to use them in their self-directed learning. In addition, Lin [45] also points out that the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from a good viewing experience might contribute to students to motivate themselves toward greater self-directed learning.

In EFL settings, it is difficult to get a large amount of exposure to the target language unless people try to seek it on their own [46], [56]. As language input which learners are able to receive is limited and not enough for them to improve their language skills [69], it is important for learners to find different means to receive language input outside the classrooms. As films are easily available materials and are the most popular for students, films are rich sources for learners to receive a large amount of listening input outside the classroom [78]. Furthermore, film-based instruction could teach students effective ways of viewing films for learning a second language [47].

2.6 Lowering affective filters

According to Lozanov [48], human beings have the potential to learn at a faster rate and retain huge amounts of information if we can eliminate some of the psychological barriers, such as anxiety, which impede learning. Moreover, Krashen and Terrell [41] assert that acquisition occurs best when the affective filter is low. Therefore, lowering the students' affective filters to some extent is important in the language classrooms to optimize acquisition.

When students watch movies, they are able to learn English more effectively because not only are movies fun, but they provide an environment with low anxiety and pressure [80]. Consequently, stu-

dents are able to receive linguistic input in a favorable atmosphere [45]. In classes in which films are used, "students find themselves in a more relaxed atmosphere in which they can forget about themselves ー their egos and their fears about how they appear in the eyes of others ー and simply enjoy the viewing experience" ([45], p. 43). When students are enrolled in regular English classes, they tend to feel pressure and anxiety from the expectations and anticipations of being asked questions by teachers [25]. Lowering students' anxiety by "creating a pleasant, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom" [21] can contribute to their ongoing motivational development. Lin [45] also points out that films can be useful in eliminating fears and pressures so that students can learn to speak and listen to English in a more comfortable and relaxing atmosphere, which also leads students to "feel more willing to be in touch with English more voluntarily." (p. 43). The research conducted by El-Banna [22] shows that EFL learners have higher levels of anxiety in their English class than ESL students. Therefore, it is important for teachers in Japan to consider lowering students' affective filter, and using films is one way to achieve this.

2.7　Maintaining attention

As Anderson [3] points out, teenagers have a short attention span, and easily get bored and lose their concentration. That age group has a harder time concentrating on studying for a long duration than adult learners. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to add flexibility, diversity, and variety to the curriculum in order to attract and maintain students' attention and interests for the whole class time [24]. Using films in English classes could be helpful for teachers to maintain students' attention. Ur [77] argues that stimulating visual aids are effective to increase learners' concentration. Stempleski and Tomalin [72] contend that learners quickly gain interests when the language is presented in a lively way through audio-visual media. When students only listen to audio-cassettes, or only read textbooks or look at pictures, they easily lose their interests in studying. Balatova's [5] research shows that students in the sound-only conditions were less successful in maintaining their interests and concentration in listen-

ing than students in the video-sound conditions. Compared to other authentic language materials, such as radio and newspapers, films seem to be one of the most favorable media among students [25].

Moreover, language resources with plots can be better at attracting and maintaining students' attention for an extended period than materials without stories [12]. Lin's [43] research reveals the importance of understanding plot for students to learn English through films. Cisar [16] argues that feature "films last long enough to use up the student enthusiasm without causing boredom," as they are able to "escape into the characters as they develop" (p. 3). People are eager to know what follows and how the story ends [47], which makes it possible for students to maintain their concentration for an extended period.

3．Linguistic effects

Using films not only has positive psychological effects on language learning, as I discussed above, but they also provide useful materials for learners to improve their language skills. After the discussion about the advantages of films as teaching materials, rationale for the effects of using films on students' language skills are discussed.

3.1　Authentic language materials

One of the major advantages of films is that films can provide authentic language for learners. Many scholars argue for the significance of using authentic materials in language classes, especially in improving listening skills [23], [29], [61], [65]. Many scholars assert the effectiveness of films as authentic materials in the language classroom [4], [12], [24], [64], [71]. Baddock [4] argues that it is necessary for students to learn "language as it is used by native speakers for real purposes, rather than language 'invented' by linguists and textbook writers" (p. 39). Viewing films requires students to understand language with "more realistic demands, which motivate students to participate in film-related activities ([73], p. 2). Rogers and Medley [64] contend that authentic materials provided language learners with the opportunity to learn how to communicate effectively in a foreign language by experiencing the language as it

is used by native speakers for real communication. Stempleski [71] argues that authentic films can bring real language practice and lively discussion into the EFL classroom. It is necessary for learners to be exposed to the language used in real life in order to acquire communicative competence [13] and practical English skills.

Some scholars, however, are suspicious about the effectiveness of authentic language in language classes. Widdowson [79] claims that authentic materials may not necessarily be the best materials for students to learn a second language. This is echoed in Ur [77], who states that "students may learn best from listening to speech which, while not entirely authentic, is an approximation to the real thing" (p. 23). Nonetheless, results of the survey targeting Japanese high school students suggest that students prefer to study English with authentic materials [25]. Furthermore, according to Ito [35], students do not think the English in their textbooks is English which is used in the real world. It is true that sentences in the textbooks used in their classes are graded or modified for students to understand more easily. Although most students are unaware of this fact, many of them are skeptical about the authenticity of the English used in their textbooks. They suspect that the knowledge and skills which they learn from textbooks might be useless or will not work in real conversations [35].

3.2 Combination of audio and visual input

Some scholars point out that films are more advantageous as they can provide not only authentic language but also visual images [2], [10], [72], [82]. Berwald [8] argues for the advantages of the combination of visual images, the captions, and sounds in language teaching. Stoller [73] points out the effectiveness of authentic materials with a combination of visual and audio input: "The dynamic combination of aural and visual stimuli from films has been recognized for bringing an air of reality into the classroom, thereby simulating real world language demands" (p. 2). Stempleski & Tomalin [72] argue for this advantage, pointing out that 80% of our communication consists of visual. Furthermore, according to Mehrabian [55], human communication consists

of 55% facial expressions, 38% paralinguistic features, and lexical and grammatical features make up only 8%. Visual images which films provide help students to learn nonverbal elements of communication, such as gestures and facial expressions, which are also important aspects for effective communication [24], [47], [75]. Aoki argues that learners "internalized many paralinguistic signals simply by watching videos" (p. 5). It is difficult for audio-cassettes to show how people use gestures and facial expressions to convey meaning [82].

3.3 Contextualized language

In language learning, teachers should consider avoiding having learners feel bored in language classrooms [62], [63]. Brown [11] emphasizes meaningful learning over rote-learning, which is likely to cause boredom for learners. Films are useful materials in promoting meaningful learning by providing learners a meaningful context [2], [39]. Lonergan [47] argues that presenting complete communicative situations is one of the outstanding features of films. Baddock [4] contends that "film offers the best way of showing language in real-life situations" and "realistic language is presented in realistic contexts, and the meanings are portrayed too" (p. 3). Furthermore, Stoller [74] argues that films and videos offer "the relevant schema background that makes language in that context relevant and comprehensible" (p. 10) for language learners.

3.4 Listening skills

There are several educators who argue for the advantages of using films in improving learners' listening skills [45], [58]. Before I argue the advantages of using films on learners' listening skills, I will first discuss what skills learners need to acquire and what makes listening difficult. When listening to the spoken language, two types of processing of information are involved: bottom-up processing and top-down processing. Bottom-up processing focuses on "sounds, words, intonation, grammatical structures, and other components of spoken language" ([11], p. 260). In contrast, top-down processing refers to the "activation of schemata, with deriving meaning, with global understanding, and with the interpretation of a text"

(ibid). Ur [77] points out several factors which make listening to spoken English difficult for language learners, especially informal speech: colloquial vocabulary and collocations, different accent, variation of stress and intonation, noise, redundancy, uneven pace and volume, and shortness of the chunks.

3.5　Using films for listening skills

Films are useful tools for learners to practice coping with these difficulties that I discussed above. Firstly, in order for students to acquire real-life listening skills, they need exposure to authentic language. Rost [65] contends that language input should involve "features of naturally occurring language with and between native speakers" (p. 125). King [39] asserts that "films provide sufficient listening input" for students (p. 519). As Stoller [73] argues, "through films, students are exposed to the myriad of authentic speech forms of the target language, speech forms not normally encountered in the more restricted environment of the classroom" (p. 4). Katchen [36] points out that films are able to provide not only standard spoken English but also nonstandard or regional varieties of speech for learners.

In addition, films can provide contextual visual cues which aid learners' listening comprehension. Some studies (e.g., [28], [82]) show that audio-visual materials are able to improve learners' listening comprehension. In a study of German students, Muller [58] shows that appropriate contextual visuals are able to enhance listening comprehension recall. He points out that "the visual serves as an advance organizer which activates relevant elements of stored memory, and brings them to bear on the comprehension process" (p. 340). Herron [30] also contends that "advanced organizers based on videos are also helpful for learners to improve comprehension and aid in the retention of information" (cited in Canning-Wilson, 2000, p. 2).

Furthermore, captions or subtitles, which videos and DVDs are able to provide, are very helpful features for students to clarify what they listen to and enhance their comprehension [44]. The support of visual images and captions helps students gain more comprehensible input [45]. The results of a study targeting Japanese high school students and

teachers who have used films in their classroom show that many of them agree that using films as an instructional tool can have positive effects on the improvement of students' listening comprehension skills [25].

3.6　Using films for language retention

Visual images that films provide help learners to retain language information [34], [35]. A study in which videos is used with EFL learners, conducted by Herron, Hanley, and Cole [31], supports the hypothesis "that more meaningful an advanced organizer is the more impact it can have on comprehension and retention" (cited in [14], p.2). Ishihara and Chi [34] state that "film's multi-sensory input is likely to assist in more effective memory retention, since it requires viewers to use the right hemisphere of the brain in addition to the left, which is already activated for language learning" (p. 31). Son, Reese, and Davie [70] also report that using both visual and audio is effective for recalling from memory.

The effectiveness of closed captions should be noted as another powerful learning aid of films. Numerous studies show the pedagogical effectiveness of using closed captions [27], [50], [51], [52], [59]. Markhan's [52] research proves that the "availability of captions did significantly improve the ESL students' listening ability to recognize words on the videotapes that also appeared on the subsequent listening only multiple-choice tests" (p. 324).

3.7　Using films for speaking，writing and reading skills

In addition to listening skills, films can be effective materials for teaching the other three core language skills. For production skills, such as speaking and writing, Stoller [74] points out that films are able to be used as springboards for learners to have more active language production and discussions in the classroom. Lin [45] contends that films are able to help learners to "relate the plots and themes to their own experience and current concern" (p. 44). The relevancy or connection makes it easier for learners to find something to talk and write about. Morley and Lawrence [57] also argue that films which involve controversial, personal and social issues act

as powerful motivators for learners to speak and write in order to exchange their ideas and opinions.

McKay [53] argues that "films have several advantages in helping students find something to say, which is the most difficult part of the composing process…[and] they provide students with a concrete context in which to explore their own feelings and experiences" (p. 44). Yamamoto and Nakagawa [81] conducted a research that shows using films is useful in improving students' writing skills. McKay [53] further argues that "films provide a context in which to explore cultural difference…[and] the viewing of a film…involves an interplay between the culture of the text and the culture of the viewer" (p. 44). She also claims that as films activate learners' personal experience, they help a writer get started.

Films are also useful materials for reading instruction. Some teachers use films for a pre-reading activity, for the purpose of giving students background information before they read the literature [1], [49], [67]. Lin [45] argues that "cinematic works based on novels can stimulate viewers to read the original text and encourage students to explore related articles or books about the film" (p. 46). Furthermore, she argues that "written transcripts of film dialogues are also very good resources for reading practice" (p. 46).

4. Conclusion

While I argue the advantages of this approach, I am obliged to mention that using films requires enormous preparation time and effort in planning effective lesson plans. Because teachers have to be familiar with the material before they present the film to the students, they have to preview it several times, design film-related activities (pre-viewing, in-viewing, and post-viewing activities), and make transcripts and handouts. However, I believe that using films may benefit teachers to diversify the instruction, and to provide a motivating and effective learning environment. Finally, applying this approach to teaching English can be a rewarding experience for both teachers and students alike.

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