

**HOW TO USE ENGLISH MOVIES TO IMPROVE A STUDENT'S LISTENING AND  
SPEAKING ABILITY IN CHINESE ESL CULTURE LEARNING CLASSROOMS**

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Date: May 5, 2011

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A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Masters of Science

in

Education

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by

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2011

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the people who have helped me throughout this seminar paper writing.

My deepest gratitude goes first to my advisor, Dr. Raymond Spoto, who has contributed his precious insight and knowledge towards reading drafts and revising them. Without his patience and support, this thesis could not have reached its present form.

My gratitude also extends to all the teachers who taught me during these two years for their kind encouragement and patient instructions.

I am also thankful to my friends, for their encouragement and help for the completion of this thesis.

I would like to offer my particular thanks to my parents, for their understanding and continual support.

Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Raymond Spoto, Ph.D

In recent years, the importance of teaching culture in the ESL classroom has been discussed a lot and widely recognized. Researchers have paid much attention to promoting cultural learning. Since a picture is worth a thousand words, many teachers use movies in their classes. They think movie teaching is both good for culture learning and for improving listening and speaking ability. However, there are still many researchers that have different opinions. Although researchers have used movies to teach culture, there were still advantages and disadvantages, and researchers have not enough much attention as to how to avoid many problems that could occur.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the importance of teaching culture in the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom has been discussed a lot and widely recognized. According to Hu (2004), human language is a direct manifestation of culture, and learning a second language involves learning a second culture.

Many researchers who insist on using movies in a culture classroom can rapidly promote cultural learning and improve a student's listening and speaking skills. Popular films can be used successfully in a wide range of language, and culture classes (Donna, 2000). Furthermore, audio-visual movies can mobilize a student's enthusiasm for visual learning, listening, speaking and other senses. According to one advocate Wu (2002), the goals of learning through movies are to strengthen listening, speaking and interpretation skills, and to understand foreign people, their customs, behaviors, values beliefs, hopes and dreams.

There still are teachers who hesitate to integrate films into the ESL classrooms because of the uncertainty of the educational efficacy of viewing an entire film in class and the motivational value of the repeated use of short film clips (Li, 2000). Whether movies should be used to teach culture in ESL classroom, researchers are still in controversy. Most of the researchers insist that, if teachers use the right methods, the advantages of using movies will ultimately outweigh its disadvantages. In order to make the movie class more effective, teachers should know their role in the class, and the requirements for them.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem expressed as a question is, “How to use English movies to improve a student’s listening and speaking ability in Chinese ESL culture learning classrooms?”

### **Definition of Terms**

Culture learning: Language is not only a tool of communication, but it is also a part of culture.

“Foreign language learning is foreign culture learning (Wu, 2002).”

ESL: Abbreviation for the term English as a second Language.

### **Delimitations of Research**

My research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety (90) days. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/ Google Scholar and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) as the primary sources. Key search topics include “culture learning”, “movie”, “ESL”, and “listening and speaking”.

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of literature on the studies of culture teaching strategies employed by ESL learners will be conducted. A second review of literature relating factors include the importance of cultural teaching, why we choose movies to teach, how should the teachers use movies. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **Culture Study in the ESL Classroom**

Everyone knows the importance of teaching listening, and speaking in the ESL classroom. But why do we need to learn culture in a language classroom? The linguist, Lade, defined the goal of learning a foreign language as the ability to use it, understand its meaning and connotations in terms of the target language and culture, and the ability to understand the speech and writing of the natives of the target culture in terms of their meaning as well as their impact on cultural learning. Language and culture are inseparable; teaching English is also teaching English culture.

Language is not only a tool of communication, but it is also a part of culture (Wu, 2002). English, without adequate cultural background, can never be fully appreciated. The role of cultural learning in the foreign language classroom has been the concern of many teachers and scholars, and has sparked considerable controversy. Foreign language teachers should try to develop the students' awareness of cultural learning as well as language learning.

#### **Why Movies are Chosen**

Since cultural study is really indispensable, many researchers have studied the ways of teaching culture in the ESL classroom, and the use of movies in the culture classroom is not new. Sarah and Patricia (2009) stated that, the imagery and sound of film has the power to capture attention and spur thinking in a way that words don't, viewing an entire film is necessary to explore a multilayered issue such as cultural proficiency.



According to Kim (1996), movies can be used collectively to help students define what constitutes culture and to broaden their understanding of co-cultures. Xing (2005) stated that a movie has quite a unique advantage in introducing foreign culture; it could show the actual situation of a city or a country, and the real structure of a culture. The impression and vividness is outstanding compared with other methods.

What is more, according to Hu (2006), movies provide both audio and visual materials that help the students understand the language more easily. When watching a film, students not only listen to the characters, but also watch their movements. In addition, the scenes, the props and other aspects make the communication so real that, by watching the film, students seem to almost interact with the activities in the movies. Furthermore, in a film class they tend to learn in a natural way so they pick up the language spontaneously. Xu and Guo (2007) stated that, for many students movies are much more attractive, interesting, and impressive than common material printed in books or audible material in tape, because of the visual nature and immediacy of the medium. It could greatly increase a student's enthusiasm and imagination.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Movies**

Researchers believe that through movies, students can understand the deeper meaning of language and the connotation of culture. This is especially true for most Chinese learners, who lack the authentic English language-learning environment. But other researchers stated that, although there are many advantages of using movies through English teaching and learning, there are still some problems that arise during practical teaching and learning that cannot be ignored.

Wu (2002) stated that the goals of learning through movies are to strengthen listening, speaking, interpretation skills, and understanding foreign people, their customs, their behaviors, their values, their beliefs, their hopes and their dreams. For example, the movie *Gone with the Wind* provides a great deal of information about American Civil War. In the movie *Forrest Gump*, we can learn, not only some historical events, but also some local customs and practices like the school bus, the single parent families, the rugby match, the students' life in kindergarten, primary school and in the university.

In a research article Zhao (2009) holds that, an original movie can be very motivating and interesting. In this way language learning will become more enjoyable. In addition, audio-visual English movies can best mobilize a student's enthusiasm to visual listening, speaking and other senses, and greatly inspire the student's curiosity. Movies make learning English a natural and efficient expansion of human knowledge, and improve English communication skills. According to Liu, Zhao, and Duan (2009), there are many differences between Chinese and Western cultures. From original movies students can understand, not only the stories that happened to foreign people, but also their customs, communication, political system, and content of the legal system. They help students have a better understanding of cultural knowledge in foreign countries, and avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Xu and Guo (2007) argued that English movies offer authentic voice material, varied vocabulary and cultural material; it can be said that movies could be used as an encyclopedia. But if teachers do not pay attention to their methods, there will be many problems. For example, during the study, some students were unconsciously distracted by the lively visual senses, they got distracted by the drama in the plot, and they then forgot their real task.

According to Xing (2005), the various types of movies are produced for learners of different levels of language proficiency. No matter what kind of language class, appropriate movie materials can always be found. In opposition, a recent study Liu (2008) argued that, only some movies can be adopted as teaching and learning materials, as to satisfy the different levels of proficiency reflected in ability of the students. It is hard for teachers to find movies for elementary students. Especially because the language in movies is often spoken very fast or hard to understand, it's hard for elementary students to get the whole idea of the movie and the purpose for teaching the textbook through a related movie. Besides, movies can be a distraction during learning.

Xing (2005) states that, due to different cultural backgrounds and social values, some of the movies from the Western World contain certain kinds of content, which are not appropriate for the unprepared and immature mind, such as films with some scenes of violence, despair, drugs, suicide, pornography, and so on. Teachers should be extremely cautious and particular about their choices. In addition, the time for class teaching is limited, but the movies chosen for textbook teaching always take a long time to finish. Thus, it is hard to select a suitable film for teaching (Hu, 2006).

Although the weakness of using movies has been an obstacle during the teaching and learning process, many researchers still consider it as an important medium. Liu (2008) argued that, if there are to be more and more movies chosen to fit the textbook, and if the movie courses are be satisfactorily carried out with both the help of students and teachers, the advantages of using movies will ultimately outweigh its disadvantages.

In order to make movie classes effective, researchers insist teachers should know their role and requirement in class. There must be some methods to be used and some activities to be prepared for language teachers.

### **How to Use Movies**

Obviously, in a movie class, the selection of movie is very important. Teachers should find proper movies for their different students. But if teachers can't use movies in a right way during their teaching, the movie class still won't be successful. According to David (1999), several teachers prefer to extract short sections from a number of movies, whereas other teachers may suggest using a single movie during the course of half a year or even a year. Some teachers will pause the movie to let students think about certain activities until they understand, while others insist that movies should be played without any interruption. Even if teachers use the same movie, different teachers still can use the movie in different ways. The role of the movie is important, the role of the teacher is also crucial. Therefore how to use movies is another important point in a movie class.

Hu (2006) suggested that, teachers should know their role in class. Teachers play a very important role in a movie classes because they act as an organizer, a controller, a participant, a facilitator and an evaluator as well as a researcher or an investigator. In order to make the activity run smoothly and efficiently before the activity take place, teachers should give instructions clearly and concisely; they also have to control the pace. During the role-playing, the teacher can join one or two groups as an ordinary participant. Xu and Guo (2007) also suggest that teachers should consider some questions or activities before the class starts watching the movie.

Some researchers insist that classroom time is limited; teachers can only let the students view parts of the movies, as it is hard for the students to understand the connotations of culture. But according to Sarah and Patricia (2009), full-length films tend to be deeper and more insightful than those in response to a short clip, a better approach is to have teachers watch the film beforehand and then spend the time together discussing what they saw in order to prepare for what they want to teach.

Another important point that teachers must pay attention to is that there are many different types of movies: dramas, historical actions, thrillers, science fiction, and musical movies. Therefore the selection of movies remains the key question for teachers. According to Wu (2002), the movies should not be too complicated. If the story is too difficult for students to understand, they may feel puzzled and they develop a fear of learning. Moreover, the selection of movies should be based on a student's interests. Zhao (2009) strongly assert that a good movie must have cultural value. Traditional movies will have a good social and cultural expression, such as *Gone with the Wind*, *The Sound of Music*, *Roman Holiday*, *Forrest Gump*, and *The Graduate*. But other researchers argue that, as time passes by, culture as well as the English language changes. Many new words are added every year. Some words come from popular culture; some may be influenced by other languages. Therefore, teachers should also use some new movies in their teaching, such as *Million Dollar Baby*, *Crash*, and *Babel*. However, in those movies may contain some scenes of violence, despair, or pornography.

After selecting a cultural value movie, teachers should help students understand the culture. According to Zhao (2009), before the movie screening, teachers should first make a brief explanation of the cultural background knowledge. Teachers can also design some questions, let students find out through movies, require them to pay attention to the conversation, cultural

background, customs, and other knowledge. Then again, in the right place, teachers should allow students to comment on these issues.

Xu and Guo (2007) argued that it is hard for students to watch the whole movie for just one time and then understand the real meaning of the movie, not to mention the understanding of the cultural background, the social value, or the learning of language. Therefore, teachers should choose some important parts of the movie and allow students to watch those parts repeatedly. For example, teachers can choose one section, ask students to listen carefully, pay attention to the dialogue, and then ask them to repeat the dialogue.

Xing (2005) suggest that, while watching the movie, teachers could also pause the movie to let students think about certain activities, and it could be replayed for as many times as possible for students to understand or imitate. But Hu (2006) stated that movies should be played without any interruption. Students do not want interruptions. They might want to get an overall impression about the movie and do not pay that much attention to details.

After class, Tricia (2002) suggests that, teachers can combine the movie and extra-curricular activities together. After the movie ends, teachers can ask students to do such things as: have group discussions, a group presentation on their evaluation and understanding, or write reviews of movies; they can also play roles or give lectures. Through communication, not only can they deepen the understanding of culture, but they also greatly enhance the spoken language they have been trained in.

Zhao (2009) also suggest that teachers can ask students to first write a short summary or comments on issues about culture or the characters they like in the movie by themselves; then they can discuss this with others. These activities attempt to check whether students have understood the movie and they also provide feedback to teachers. Organizing feedback is an

effective way to assess a student's performance from this stage; thus teachers can see where they need to improve their classes.

## CHAPTER 3

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the review of the literature we know that, using movies in ESL classroom has both benefits and challenges. Whether movies should be used to teach culture in ESL classroom is still being discussed. But most of the researchers insist that, if teachers use the right methods, the advantages of using movies will ultimately outweigh its disadvantages. The problem is that different researchers still have different concepts on how to use movies to teach. It is meaningful for researchers to figure out the proper ways on how teachers should use movies in the classroom.

According to analysis of research in this field of study, there are some comments teachers must pay attention to. First of all, teachers should make sure that they are prepared before class. Teachers should know their roles in their classes. A teacher is an organizer, a controller, a participant, a facilitator, an evaluator as well as a researcher or an investigator. Teachers must pay close attention to the selection of movies; movies must have cultural value, appropriate for the levels of students, and they must meet the interest of students, and they cannot be too complicated. Teachers can list some important points of vocabulary and culture which students may not know. They can design specific activities according to their students' needs.

In addition, during the class time, teachers should control the pace. Teachers can first make a brief explanation about the backgrounds of the movie; help students understand that a certain cultural aspect is important. They can also explain those difficult points that they list before class to their students. It is a good idea to ask students to find answers to a couple of questions before playing the movie. Sometimes a replay of an important section is needed.



Teachers can also ask students to write down their opinions, discuss in groups, share their ideas with the class, or role play.

Finally, after class, teachers can give students an exam or ask them to write an essay. Students may use their own notes in the exam or use what they have learned during the class in their essays. This feedback from students is important for teachers to figure out where they should improve in their teaching. Teachers should also give students feedback if students have problems or need help.

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