

Video Applications in the Language Classroom

by *Alan Fisher*

In a continually-changing language teaching world, video provides one of the most flexible and challenging options available to today's teacher.

Technical developments of the last two years combined with decreased costs due to saturation marketing have made an ever-expanding variety of new methods and classroom applications available to the majority of teachers.

The prime task facing educators wishing to use video is to match carefully-defined language goals to an appropriate video. In order to do this effectively it is not necessary to possess an encyclopedic knowledge of film. Nor is it necessary to spend long hours viewing perspective videos. Rather, educators can apply a simple two-part measure to determine the suitability of a video for their classes.

First it should be determined whether the video contains authentic language (language as actually used by native speakers in real-life situations) relevant to the teaching goals. Both speed of speech and language complexity are of secondary consideration to confronting students with natural speech.

Secondly, videos should be selected for their capacity to maximize student involvement. Despite the obvious importance of language (or in some case visuals), it is the power of the video to involve student's attention and emotions which most often determine success in the classroom. A well-made video can make students want to know what the actors are saying or stimulate them to use their own words to describe what they've seen.

By applying these criteria an administrator or teacher can select appropriate video materials for the classroom. These materials fall into two broad categories: commercially-prepared educational videos, and, on the other hand, documentaries and narrative films.

There is a wide variety of commercial videos today. They are generally not available in bookstores and must be obtained directly from the publisher. They are,

however, displayed at the yearly Osaka English Language Bookfair and at the JALT Convention which is held annually at various locations throughout Japan.

These commercial videos have much to recommend them. They are planned to last either one or two semesters and are accompanied by well-packaged student and teacher texts. They are aimed at specific levels and sometimes are built around narratives using professional, although unknown actors. Supplementary audio materials may also be included.

However, there are problems with these commercial videos. They are expensive and are for the most part produced for the European and American classroom. They possess little flexibility and cannot be used by students of levels other than that targeted. More problematic than that is that they sometimes present language in a non-natural segmented way and that student involvement is frequently only limited. It is not unusual to find students initially enthusiastic but to have that enthusiasm decline. For educators purchasing these expensive packages there is always the risk that they be met with lukewarm or negative results.

There are also dangers, of course, in using documentaries and feature films in the language classroom. The teacher will have to prepare or shape accompanying exercises or other language teaching materials as well as withstand gracefully student pressure to turn video use into pure entertainment. Furthermore, teachers must develop a sense of what is educationally valuable in a video, and, unfortunately this most often results from trial and error.

Despite these problems there are many documentary and feature films that meet the twin requirements of possessing natural language and maximizing student involvement. The language used in these videos is the same that students will hear in conversation with native speakers. Even more important, a documentary whose content introduces or amplifies other class materials, or a popular feature film with a compelling narrative can produce a classroom filled with alert and receptive students.

The feature or narrative film seems to have special power to engage student attention.

Recent studies have shown that students' learning is maximized when language material is presented in a context with which they are familiar.

A recent study by Eloise Johnson of Sophia University examining the progress of six Japanese businessmen in Singapore notes the following. The three students who were active in the city outside class hours progressed considerably more than three

who hung closely together, seldom interacting with others or leaving their residence. (This study will be published in the English Language Teacher's Journal in 1989.)

Most Japanese students have only limited contact with foreigners at best. For them these films can be a window into the target culture, a window already partially opened since these films are first available at Japanese cinemas and contain actors and themes which may have been previously seen.

In addition, documentaries and feature films can be used with great flexibility. They can be employed as supplementary material in segments which may run as short as one or two minutes, or as the focus of a lesson or an entire class.

Supplementing the main teaching material with a video, of course, involves more than linking the video with the primary material unless the teaching goal is primarily illustration (See page 3, #13) The teacher must decide on what introductory or follow-up materials to use. It is through these accompanying activities that the video is amplified and that language learning occurs.

Below are some samples of supplementary activities which have been used successfully with video.

A. Uses for structure practise

1. Practicing adjectives - FLASHDANCE/STREAMLINE ENGLISH, Lesson 5 - Students use videos to describe characters in a film.
2. ING-form, RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK (Indiana Jones I) Lesson 21 - As the teacher stops the action with a pause button, students describe the action in present continuous sentences.
3. Commands - GONE WITH THE WIND - STREAMLINE ENGLISH, Lesson 12 - Following the teacher's commands, students act out the last scene of *GONE WITH THE WIND*. Then they watch the scene, and in small groups write sentences about the scene.
4. Can/Can't - SPLASH, STREAMLINE ENGLISH, Lesson 14 - After watching a mermaid, students describe what they can do.

B. Non-Grammar based video-techniques

1. Stop the scene short of the ending. Ask the students to write an ending to the scene.
2. Show the scene in fast-forward. Have the students try to guess what is happening.

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3. Show the scene in reverse. Have the students guess what is happening.
4. Stop film with freeze-frame button. Ask questions. Write answers on the board. After finishing the scene ask the questions again.
5. Summarize the scene before watching. After watching have the students summarize.
6. Write a narration for the scene. Have the students read the narration, then watch the scene. After watching, have the students read the narration again. Then ask comprehension questions requiring sentences from the narration for answer.
7. Brainstorming - Show a lengthy scene. Have the students try to recall what they saw. Write students responses on the board.
8. Purposely make mistakes. Have the students correct you.
9. Write sentence from the dialogue on strips of paper. Tear the strips of paper in half. Have the students match the halves correctly.
10. Write two summaries of the scene, one correct and one incorrect. Read both before watching the scene. After watching, ask the students to identify the correct summary.
11. Give the students worksheets. Stop the film so that students can circle the correct description of what is happening on the screen.
12. The film as notional-functional supplement : To be used with *PERSON TO PERSON* :
 - a. Weddings - *The Godfather*. After watching have the students practice sentences concerned with weddings or planning parties.
 - b. planning to go to a party - *Back to School*
 - c. visiting a hospital - *Whose Life Is It?*
 - d. ordering lunch - *Five Easy Piece*
13. The film as illustration
 - a. *Close Encounters of a Third Kind*, from " Devil's Tower, *An American Sampler*, Chapt. 2 - People try to escape up the side of Devil's Tower.
 - b. *Bullet*, from San Francisco, *An American Sampler*, chapt. 3 - a car chase through the streets of San Francisco.
14. Listening to sound only prior to watching video. After listening have students predict what kind of scene it will be.

In using video for supplementary purposes, the teacher is like a shopper at a supermarket, looking for the best brand of flour with which to bake a pie. The teacher, however, who uses video as primary teaching material must not only choose appropriate videos and methods but order them in a syllabus that will guide the students throughout the class.

“Guide” is the key word here. One problem with extensive use of video is overstimulation. For students, even advanced ones, the interlocking dialogue, background voices and noises and shifting visuals can be overwhelming. It is a teacher’s job, therefore, to direct student attention to what is important much in the way a tour guide points out highlights along the highway.

For this reason prewatching activities become essential. Even if the teacher chooses to screen the entire film at the beginning of the course, portions of the film should be shown on a daily basis or at least at intervals throughout the class. Before each viewing the teacher should introduce those elements considered important to the segment to direct student attention. This can be done by summarizing the events, discussing its themes, showing a subtitled version first or encouraging students to predict what is going to happen based on their knowledge of the movie up to that point or of movies in general (ex. Who will win? : the hero or the villain) and their respective knowledge of Western and Japanese culture. After watching the video students check the accuracy of their guesses. As the class progresses and students know more about the story and characters their rate of accuracy will invariably grow.

The teacher must also decide before the course begins how to screen the film : whether to show it in its entirety at the beginning of the class, whether to use a subtitled or an undubbed version or both, and how many times and in what segments to show it.

Likewise decisions must be made about how to present the script. The teacher may opt to use novelizations - short novels based on the movie in an attempt to follow-up on its popularity. Worksheets containing key sentences from the script can be used, or students can study the script itself. Teachers may also choose to have students transcribe their own scripts.

Generally it seems best to use the script as text since what ultimately brings students to a video class is a desire to know what is being said in the film, especially once they become aware that Japanese subtitles frequently omit or alter large portions of the dialogue. It is also possible to use the script as a reading text asking comprehen-

sion questions, but this tends to downgrade the language aspect of the film to a secondary role.

There are many levels of language used in films besides that of the standard language. Substandard forms, for example “I didn’t do nothing” appear as do idioms, slang and dialect. All of these forms appear frequently in conversation and sometimes in writing. Teachers can therefore employ methods for teaching conversational English to practice the language in the script. New grammar and vocabulary can also be extracted and practiced. For example in *An Officer and A Gentleman* the hero’s father says “I don’t have time for this daddy stuff.” “Daddy stuff” refers to those activities that a father does with a son. After defining the term students could be asked to give examples of what a father does.

A few lines later the same character says, “When I’m not here, I’m at sea.” Students could be asked to practise the subordinate when clause by telling what they do when they’re not in class.

These conversational snippets can be extended into role plays, embedded in dictations or developed into games. Dialogue can be used to introduce phonemes in worksheets containing sentences from the script. Words in these sentences containing target phonemes are omitted as in the examples below.

ex. /i/ Don't give _____ none of that Daddy stuff.

omitted word : me

/i/ When I'm not here, I'm at _____.

omitted word : sea

Since film possess both audio and visual components, and since it is made with a printed script containing spoken language it can be used by an English teacher in thousands of ways. Using video is certainly not the easiest way to teach, but its components contain elements of unique value for both a receptive and an active classroom.

Technical note : Video machines are simple to operate, and the cheapest models will be adequate for classroom use. Generally American tapes may be used on Japanese machines, although European and Middle Eastern tapes will not work on ordinary machines. Despite the general compatibility of American and Japanese tapes, teachers are still advised to check machine - tape compatibility prior to using since sometimes a video which plays well on one machine will inexplicably have problems or may even

be unwatchable on a second machine.

Suggestions For Further Reading

- CILT — Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, 20 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1 Y 5AP, UK. Specialised bibliography B13: *The Use of Radio, Televiston, Video and Films in Language Teaching*.
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