

Teaching English through Movies

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I use movies in my classes to integrate language skills while generating student interest. Movies can function to bring the outside world, particularly the target culture into the classroom. Movies can provide unlimited opportunities for communicative language learning. Students do not have to be sold on movies. They are already fans. My Japanese students amaze me every day with their in-depth knowledge of the movies and their familiarity with actors, actresses, directors and stories of popular films. Whenever I ask my students about their free time interests, the most frequent response is “watching movies.” As a teacher, I find it comforting to find a group of learners that have a common bond, which brings them together. Movies can serve as that bond. When teaching movies, I like to begin by presenting and eliciting vocabulary items. I prefer to give the handout to the students a week prior to the lesson. I generally assign them the vocabulary items as homework. This is necessary considering the sheer volume of vocabulary items that we have to cover during each lesson. Allowing them to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary will prove to be a real time saver. Allowing students the chance to familiarize themselves with vocabulary will contribute to a more learner-generated lesson. Instead of doing a teacher-centered vocabulary presentation, I may choose to separate the students into small groups. They can discuss their vocabulary items among themselves and use me as a last resort in clearing up any confusion they may have regarding the vocabulary items. This will free all of us up to use our time more wisely and constructively with some of the other more demanding components in the lesson. I may use a vocabulary check activity in order to check for understanding.

The thought of watching movies without subtitles can be very frightening for students. This is where generous praise and encouragement can go a long way to boost confidence. Before we even start, I commend students for their bravery and I remind them not to set their expectations too high at first. I tell them that improving their listening skills can take a while and they should be satisfied with gradual improvement. Having realistic expectations is very important for Japanese learners who are inclined to give up if they do not make significant progress in a short period of time. The English language contains slang, idioms, phrasal verbs, difficult linking and pronunciation, which combine as a difficult task for non-native listeners. As a teacher, I have come to realize that keeping learner expectations in check is an important role, especially in a potentially tough medium like movies.

The fast pace of the language can be frustrating for all listeners. Moving the focus to that of discerning what is presented provides a sense of accomplishment and boosts their morale. Listening activities allow students to see real progress in improved language skills. The task here is for students to insert the correct vocabulary word into the blank from the list of vocabulary words provided. There can be additional effective listening activities on the handout, such as listening to match information, listening to important information, and listening for details.

I often include a number of comprehension questions in the handout, which if answered correctly, will demonstrate comprehension. It is always good to do this in pairs for increasing communication. All of these creative listening strategies can greatly facilitate students in gaining a grip on understanding movie content. Another good strategy that may contribute to enhanced comprehension is having students put events in chronological order. "Role Play" is another creative strategy for video viewing. It is useful to play the video with the sound off and have students create dialogue. Once they have made up the dialogue, they can read the script. This is a good sub-strategy of role-play. Having students role-play may be a good technique

for getting inside the character's head. This can increase empathy for the character's predicament and lead to a good exchange regarding character analysis. I always make it a point to advance some thought-provoking discussion questions. These will hopefully get the students to engage in critical thinking. With Japanese learners, it generally takes an effort to induce them to think critically. History is not on their side regarding this attribute or lack of it. In the past, Japanese students studied hard because they wanted to go to big name schools in order to gain employment at famous companies. Teachers had complete authority over students and asked nothing of them except that they memorize huge amounts of information. Often teachers failed to explain why students should do so. As an English teacher, I make every effort in my movie class to provide a superfluous amount of material that can lead to great discussions in class and hopefully critical thinking will occur. I feel that it would be a disservice not to engage my students in critical thinking.

I find it necessary to play the devil's advocate at times in order to provoke students to take a stand. Movie topics are indeed loaded with the kind of content that can be a recipe for great debates. It is not long before the students do take the initiative and contribute to the movie class. These are some of the many positive outcomes that can emerge from a successful movie class, mainly being able to engage in debate, critical thinking, and to discuss stimulating topics. It is also a great idea, when possible, to decorate the class with movie paraphernalia creating a atmosphere that will help to inspire learning. At any stage of the movie lesson, it can be very helpful to supplement the course with related articles that would further provide fodder for discussion and written assignments. Recycling the vocabulary and recapping earlier episodes of the movie can also be useful in solidifying language learning.

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