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# CHINA EFL: TEACHING WITH MOVIES

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## **ABSTRACT:**

With an appreciable increase in the use of movies or captioned films to teach English as a foreign language in China, the authors embarked upon a four-year experiment to determine the efficacy of using English language movies to teach business to Chinese students. It became clear that a cavalier use of movies is an abuse of the use of movies since the appropriate use of movies requires many elements: 1. Typical movies that are educational, informative and entertaining is the first condition in successful movie teaching; 2. A functional workbook to the movies for the students to prepare before watching the movies is the second condition for effective teaching through movies. 3. Various classroom activities to induce/ elicit timely and optimal output from students is the last but most important condition to create an acquisition environment for communication. Activities such as dubbing, story retelling, acting, discussing, debating, role playing, etc are but a few proved very effective techniques the teacher can employ to engage the students.

## **KEY WORDS:**

EFL, movies, teach, China, business

## **OBSERVATION:**

Partial movie scripts are currently used throughout Mainland China to teach comprehensive reading. We observed two such recently published books at the Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press retail outlet at Shanghai International Studies University. These partial movie scripts are mainly taken from the classics.

Partial movie sound tracks are also currently used throughout Mainland China to teach listening comprehension. We observed six such recently produced CDs and cassette tapes at the Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press retail outlet at Shanghai International Studies University.

Professor Dai Jin of Tong ji University, Shanghai, has completed a project utilizing captioned Discovery Channel documentary movies<sup>1</sup> to teach listening

Comprehension, spoken English, sight interpretation and mock simultaneous interpretation, and speed-reading. He states that captioned films can shorten the gap between students' reading comprehension ability and listening comprehension ability or performance. Captioned movies can also help to improve students' reading speed by learning the skill of scanning in a very effective and entertaining way.

Numerous Chinese and foreign university level English teachers make extensive use of full-length feature films in their classrooms. Often times the teacher can be observed resting in the back of the classroom or completely absent from the classroom while many students are also sleeping, playing cell phone games or chatting.

### **INQUIRY:**

Our inquiry of approximately 500 students in various Shanghai universities established that the students found real value in using partial movie scripts for comprehensive reading (particularly scripts of the "Classics"<sup>ii</sup>), and partial movie soundtracks (again particularly ones taken from the "Classics"), and Tong ji University Professor Dai Jin's students were able to articulate particular benefits from his use of the short documentaries. Dr. Dai's approach is rooted in twenty years of experience and history that began with Prof. Zhu of Beijing Foreign Studies University<sup>iii</sup> who asked her students to repeat after the actor and watch it repeatedly until they could dub the actor or actress. Rather than steal Dr. Dai's thunder, we suggest reading his published article, "Captioned Films and Videos in Foreign Language Teaching" (2005) *Computer Assisted Foreign Language Education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> issue, Vol. 103

We made personal inquiry of more than 60 Chinese and foreign English teachers regarding their use of full length commercial movies in the classroom. These personal interviews were followed up with a written questionnaire submitted to foreign English teachers on various web sites and email lists. We received approximately 35 additional responses via the Internet inquiry. This is not a large sample compared to the reported 150,000 foreign English teachers in China<sup>iv</sup> and the reported 1 mil. Chinese English teachers.<sup>v</sup> Of the teachers surveyed, approximately 12% used DVD English movies in the classroom.

We quickly discovered that the responses easily fell within two distinct general categories. (We are reporting the general trend and not the exceptions.)

First there are the mature (35 yrs to 60 yrs.), experienced teachers (minimum 3 years experience in China) who use the movies primarily to supplement existing curriculum. The movies are pre-screened and excluded if they contain too much foul language, too much violence or sex. The movies are selected for the English content more than their entertainment value and little attention is paid to the value of the actual subject matter presented by the movie. There are pre-viewing activities to prepare the students for the movie, such as pre-teaching vocabulary from the movie so the movie will be comprehensible. There are exercises during the movie and post-viewing discussions. There is a very professional approach utilized when showing movies in the classroom.

There is real value for the students and an Internet search reveals many articles supporting this proper use of movies in the classroom.<sup>vi</sup>

The second grouping involves the younger teachers with little or no experience teaching, usually referred to as “backpackers.”<sup>vii</sup> They show movies in the classroom more as a babysitting device because their employer has failed to provide teaching materials or the teacher failed to make a lesson plan due to negligence or hangover from the consumption of alcohol the previous night. Some of these teachers (sic) even showed the English movies with Chinese subtitles, being completely unschooled in MacWhinney’s<sup>viii</sup> theory of prompting the mental lexicon, i.e. English prompt activates the English mental lexicon while Chinese prompt activates the Mandarin mental lexicon. .

Many of the movies are filled with profanity<sup>ix</sup> (44 profanities in the first scene), sex<sup>x</sup>, alternate lifestyle<sup>xi</sup> and violence<sup>xii</sup>, three subjects that are disfavored by the Chinese Government. In 2005 the movie “The People vs. Larry Flynt” was show to a freshman class in Dalian. This movie contains 28 vulgarities uttered 91 times and contains excessive heterosexual and homosexual sex scenes with full nudity. We believe that this abuse of movies requires no further elaboration.

### **EXPIRAMENT:**

Our inquiry led us to ask: If movies can be beneficial in teaching English, why not utilize them to teach business English, business, culture, history etc.? We embarked upon an experiment to obtain a preliminary answer to our question.

We pre-screened the movie “Working Girl” for its value in teaching about Intellectual Property, Copyright, Trademark, Patent, Integrity, and Trade Secrets. During the pre-screening we compiled a vocabulary list with words and phrases we believed might not be readily understood by our students. Next we showed the movie to a 3<sup>rd</sup> year class of fifty business majors. We gave a small introduction to the movie but did not pre-teach any movie vocabulary. During the student’s viewing of the movie, more than half of the students dozed off, started chatting or playing games on their cell phones. The post-viewing discussion was bland and involved a small handful of students.

Next we showed the movie (Working Girl) to another group of fifty 3<sup>rd</sup> year business majors. We also gave them the same introduction to the movie but did not pre-teach the movie vocabulary. We did inform this group that one of their final exam questions would come directly from the movie as an additional motivator. Again, knowing the importance of the movie, during the student’s viewing of the movie, more than half of the students dozed off, started chatting or playing games on their cell phones. The post-viewing discussion was bland and involved a small handful of students.

Then we showed the movie (Working Girl) to a third group of fifty 3<sup>rd</sup> year business majors but in addition to the introduction to the movie, we pre-taught our list of movie words and phrases. Much to our surprise, during the student’s viewing of the movie,

more than half of the students dozed off, started chatting or playing games on their cell phones. The post-viewing discussion was bland and involved a small handful of students.

We next showed the movie (*Working Girl*) to approximately five hundred 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year business majors. We introduced the movie but did not pre-teach from our movie words and phrases list. Instead, we asked the students to make their own lists of words and phrases that were new to them. We collected these lists and compiled a single list of words and phrases that were common on at least 65% of all of the lists. When subsequently comparing the students' combined list with our list, we found less than 5% of our words and phrases on the students' combined list. In post-viewing discussion with the students, we discovered that they were so busy compiling their lists; they were unable to grasp the theme of the movie. This speaks against activities during viewing and supports Krashen's theories<sup>xiii</sup> of "comprehensible input in a friendly environment" and "free selection."

Next we took the students' combined list of movie words and phrases and found contextually correct definitions for each. When we showed the movie (*Working Girl*) to another group of fifty 3<sup>rd</sup> year business majors, we gave them the students' combined list with definitions, one week in advance of viewing the movie. When this group viewed the movie, no one fell asleep, no one chatted and no one played cell phone games. The post-viewing discussion was lively, invigorating, and exciting, participated in by more than 90% of the students. They expressed a new appreciation for the need for IP protection in China, which was the main moral of the movie.

When we repeated this experiment with post-graduate English majors, those whose career paths are limited to translation, interpretation or teaching, the final results were not as encouraging due to their lack of any appreciable grounding in business. We initiated post-viewing reading and Internet research assignments to draw the students' attention to the relevance of the movie's theme to current events in China. This appeared to increase the students' interest and facilitated even more lively post-viewing discussions.

We repeated our experiment with the movies "Wall Street" for its value in teaching about Insider Trading, Integrity, Ethics, Morality, Virtue, Reliable, Loyal, Honesty, Corporate Culture, Corporate Responsibility, Confidentiality Agreement, Tough Love, Stock Market Manipulation, Revenge, Labor Union, Greed, and Corporate Espionage; and the movie "The Insider" for its value in teaching about Confidentiality Agreements, Whistle-Blower, Integrity, Ethics, Morality, Virtue, Reliable, Loyal, Honesty, Corporate Culture, and Corporate Responsibility. The results were similar.

## **STUDENT RESPONSES**

### **Student #1**

The special course of learning English by watching movie really helped my English skills, the major advantage of this method is that watching movie is interesting rather than others which is boring and difficult to keep. I think the specific improvement by this course include these aspects following.

First, it improves my reading as well as listening. The first time when I came to the course, I was almost

puzzled by the fast spoken English with the fast going English subtitles. But after a couple of courses, I can understand the major content of the movie. Now it becomes much easier and more comfortable for me to catch onto the movie.

Second, during the discussion, I also improved my oral English. Actually during the day of discussion, we talk about anything we like not only the movie. During the discussion, we learned from each other. Many mistakes was found and then corrected during the talking.

The last and the most important is that the course built in me the English thinking. Before taking this course, the way I used English is thinking in Chinese then translate it into English, after all that process, it came out of my mouth but still with a lot of mistakes. But now it only has one process that is saying what I am thinking.

Now English is no more that bad for me, and I owe all my confidence to this special course of learning English with fun.

### **Student #2**

I like your new method of teaching English. Through your class my English has improved a lot. And the most important point is that my oral English is much more fluent than ever.

Here is my opinion about the advantages of your book:

First, I learn through watching movies, which makes me more interested and concentrated. And I can remember longer than reading ordinary textbooks.

Second, after watching the movie, I have works related to it to do which will make me more impressive. And we will discuss the movie. This is the most important part because it makes me think and express ourselves and my oral English has practiced.

Third, there is a lot of information in the movie. I can learn many professional words and expressions and the use of them. After reading your book we can have a better understanding.

### **Student #3**

Thank you for helping me with my oral English. I do not dare to say that after joining your special English class I have improved my speaking English very much, but I did learn a lot from it.

And also, thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your fantastic movies. They shared a lot of funny things and also professional subjects to us. At the same time, watching & learning. For the movie's part, I have something to say and must to say about what it brought to me. Meanwhile, I do hope that my experience and point of view would give you and the forthcoming students a few suggestions:

#### 1. Scanning materials.

Before you watch the movie, it's necessary to read the materials that you have. It can help you know the background of the movie, and you also can go on the Internet to find the data or information that helps you to get in deeper with that movie.

#### 2. Words and phrases.

In the movie, there are so many "American" phrases and slangs that you can't understand. After watching the movie you will know their meaning, how they are used, in what circumstance you can use it naturally. Of cause, most of them were listed in your workbook; so, it really saves you a block of time.

#### 3. Movie discussion

I like the movies, not because the movie itself brings satisfaction, but it also helps me to improve my listening and speaking. But actually, it's more than that. You will find it's a quiet different thing between speaking out and just watching. During the discussion, you will find there are a lot of ideas and feelings that you got from the movie. When you open your mouth and speak out to express your own opinion and

try to convince somebody, you will have absorption of other people's viewpoints, which you didn't realize. And finally agree to disagree.

4. Think actively

I think it's a great help for me that I took the special English class. Seize the chance to express your unique opinion; it will bring you an unexpected surprise. So you think actively and act quickly!

5. Nervous & scary? ----NO!

As the class continues, you will find you are not afraid of speaking in public anymore, not afraid to make mistakes, not afraid to lose your valueless face, because you have grown up!

## **PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS**

Professional teachers who teach specific subjects simultaneously with teaching English can successfully utilize movies in the classroom. A great deal of preparation is required, including student participation, to properly prepare a movie for use in the classroom.

In addition to Krashen's four conditions for optimal input, we have added several more features of optimal input to make acquisition possible. The features are summarized as follows: 1. Informative 2. Cultural 3. Interesting 4. Clear and succinct 5. Interactive 6. Authentic 7. In great quantity. In addition, we believe that the learner's memory works most actively and effectively when either his or her auditory and visual stores are stimulated by something that can engage his or her full attention. Movies make the learner's articulatory organs work even when the learner is merely watching the movies silently. This is evidenced by their silent (covert) imitation of the speakers' pronunciation and utterances without uttering a sound. This is the most effective way for improving their pronunciation and intonation.

In China where the social medium for communication is Putonghua, where the strong mother tongue interference is the major obstacle to English learning, where the oriental culture influenced by Confusion's thoughts are rooted and drastically different from western culture, teaching English through movies is undoubtedly one of the most effective and easiest tools we can utilize because movies meet all the features listed above for optimal input. In China where a huge population dwarfs the small number of natives English speakers, whose influence is like spraying perfume on the ocean, the significance of teaching English through movies is multifold: it can help students to improve their pronunciation and intonation; to pick up idiomatic use of words and phrases, to assimilate English sentence structure, to be acquainted with the target culture which will prepare them for studying and living abroad or international communication at home.

The significance of teaching business through movies is also multifold: firstly, Chinese students do not have a world-view but rather, a tunnel view. They are ill informed of what has happened in the business world, or what problems may arise along with

industrial development. To know the famous cases which had been made into movies can not only enlarge their business vocabulary, but also broaden their horizons and make western business management acceptable and possible when more graduates know about western management. This weakness of education that cannot be made available to Chinese students for lack of western professionals can only be made up for through English movies with business content, with history content, with culture content. Western culture is well expressed in the English language, business management and values and habits that are all perfectly shown and manifested in the English movies.

Change means challenge. Chinese students are more used to being taught through a blackboard with a talk and chalk method, being spooned-fed in class what they are supposed to actively explore by themselves, before and after class, through reading in the library or surfing online.

To implement such a movie course, three things are important.

Typical movies that are educational, informative and entertaining is the first condition for successful teaching with movie; 2.) A functional workbook to the movies for the students to prepare before watching the movies is the second condition for effective teaching through movies. 3.) Various classroom activities to induce/ elicit timely and optimal output from students are the last but most important condition to create an acquisition environment for communication. Activities such as dubbing, story retelling, acting, discussing, debating, role playing, etc are but a few proved very effective techniques the teacher can employ to engage the students.

To summarize and comment on the movies is a necessary part of the movie review, and students can learn a lot from the summaries because they lack the ability to speak their mind even if they know the story, they simply cannot generalize when the words are not available in their minds or cannot be retrieved from their memory. So the summaries of the movies provide a great source of words which will enable the students to notice the gap between "what they want to say" and "what they can say"(Swain, 1985), thus the timely input will immediately help the students to modify their own output, thus to turn their passive vocabulary into active vocabulary. In this way, listening and speaking, reading and writing are not separated, but integrated in one course.

Students should also be encouraged to pay attention to the collocations or chunks of language while watching the movies, to repeat in their minds the expressions in current use and to parrot the words that they can understand but cannot use. With the help of the context cues in the movies, those receptive words can easily be turned into productive words, thus the lag between comprehension and production is intentionally shortened.

We remain extremely concerned about the misuse of movies in the classroom and strongly suggest implementation of an administrative procedure for review and approval of teaching materials before they make their way into the classroom.

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<sup>i</sup> The lost bombs, The Aurora, Cyber Warfare, The land warrior, U.S. Navy's dolphins, Doomsday Plans, Mystery Map, Art of Forgery, Scare me, Crime lab, Human brain, Lightning, U.S. presidency, Industrial War, George Bush's 9.11 address, Wolf at our Door, Opening trade: China and the U.S., A U.S. Presidential Inaugural Address, Youth violence.

<sup>ii</sup> Casablanca (1942), An American In Paris (1951), Citizen Kane (1941), Double Indemnity (1944), Gone With The Wind (1939), The Grapes of Wrath (1940), His Girl Friday (1940), It Happened One Night (1934), It's A Wonderful Life (1946), The Lady Eve (1941), The Maltese Falcon (1941), Meet Me In St. Louis (1944), Ninotchka (1939), North By Northwest (1959), The Philadelphia Story (1940), Roman Holiday (1953), Singin' In The Rain (1952), To Kill A Mockingbird (1962), Top Hat (1935), Wuthering Heights (1939), My Fair Lady (1964), The Thin Man (1934), My Fair Lady (1964), Arsenic and Old Lace (1944), Dinner at Eight (1933), Inherit the Wind (1960), Key Largo (1948), The Lady From Shanghai (1948), Miracle on 34th Street (1947)

<sup>iiii</sup> Prof. Zhu 's current movie list:

Book one:

Unit One Responsibility--- The Lion King  
Unit Two Over the Rainbow--- The Wizard of Oz  
Unit Three True love--- The Princess Pride  
Unit Four Culture Clash--- The Nightmare before Christmas  
Unit Five Nightmare--- Halloween  
Unit Six Reflection--- Being There  
Unit Seven Contact--- E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial  
Unit 8 Essence of Life  
Unit 9 Identity---- My Fair Lady

Book 2.

1. Changing the world--- Gone with the wind
- 2 Choices---Casablanca
3. Small Hero---It's a wonderful life
4. Big Hero---Citizen Kane
5. Democracy---Mr.Smith Goes to Washington
6. Marrow of Life---Dead Poets Society
- 7.Generation Gap---The Graduate
8. Magic---Sleepless in Seattle
9. Family and Love--- The Bridges of Madison County

<sup>iv</sup> Qiang/Wolff (2003) China ESL: An Industry Run A Muck, Progress in Education Vol. 12 Ch. 4

<sup>v</sup> MacArthur, Tom (2004) English Today Vol.20 No. 3 pg 37

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.davekees.com/content/view/81/26/>

[http://www.teflasia.com/articles/classroom/using\\_movies\\_in\\_the\\_classroom.html](http://www.teflasia.com/articles/classroom/using_movies_in_the_classroom.html)

<http://reading.indiana.edu/ieo/digests/d36.html>

[http://www.wiu.edu/UCOSO/ptf\\_greg.htm](http://www.wiu.edu/UCOSO/ptf_greg.htm)

<sup>vii</sup> People vacationing in China who interrupt their vacation for the necessity of a little work

Qiang/Wolff (2005) China EFL/ESL: The Unqualified, Teaching (sic) The Unmotivated, In a Hostile Environment, <http://www.usingenglish.com/esl-in-china/>

<sup>viii</sup> MacWhinney, B. (2002) "The Competition Model: The input, the context, and the brain" Cambridge University Press

MacWhinney, B. J., Leinbach, J., Taraban, R., & McDonald, J. L. (1989). Language learning: Cues or rules?

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<sup>ix</sup> Glen Garry, Glenn Ross (Shown to a freshman class at a Shanghai university in 2004).

<sup>x</sup> The People vs. Larry Flynt shown to a freshmen class at Liaoning Normal University in 2006

<sup>xi</sup> Wedding Banquet (A Chinese man living with his boyfriend in New York is pressured by his parents to marry a nice girl. He deceives his parents by hiding his homosexuality and then the movie really goes down hill.)

<sup>xii</sup> "A History of Violence" -Apart from five or six gunfights, which have no shortage of blood and gore, the movie contains two graphic sex scenes, an isolated case of full frontal nudity, and more swearing than I could keep track of. (Shown at Shanghai Normal 2004)

<sup>xiii</sup> Krashen, Stephen D. (1981) Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition. English Language Teaching series. London: Prentice-Hall International (UK) Ltd

"Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition", Stephen Krashen, 1982

"What theory implies, quite simply, is that language acquisition, first or second, occurs when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is not 'on the defensive'... Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. It does not occur overnight, however. Real language acquisition develops slowly, and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening skills, even when conditions are perfect. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production."