

Feature Films for English Language Teaching: A Proposal for Rural India

Dr. Debopam Raha

Associate Professor, Achhruram Memorial College, Jhalda, West Bengal, India

Abstract: Recent researches in English Language Teaching attempts to make learning of English for the non-native speakers of English more and more effective. Students of rural India are not only non-native speakers of English but also most of them are first and second generation learners with hardly any exposure to the English language outside their classrooms. This paper attempts to demonstrate how mainstream and popular feature films made in English, which are very cheap and easily available now, can be used to teach English, with all its nuances, to the rural students of India.

Keywords: comprehension, dialect, ELT, film, listening skill, pronunciation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, in this modern age of information revolution, teachers, students and scholars use a very wide range of aids and mediums for teaching, learning and research. Students watch and use audio-visual educational programmes in almost all the disciplines in general and in science in particular. They do watch movies in social science and literature classes. Regarding the specific area of English Language Teaching, the students even use language laboratories and in it complicated computer programmes designed for teaching language. While researches in ELT had suggested quite a long time ago a switch over from age old teacher centric lecture based Grammar Translation method to a new student-centric interaction based Communicative method, we still find English language teaching in most Indian classrooms go on in the same old fashion based on Grammar Translation method, thanks to the mental make-up of the policy makers and teachers, lack of proper competence and training for the teachers, lack of text books, lack of exposure to the language for the students outside classrooms and the like. For the higher classes of English language, text books with prose pieces and poems still dominate the curriculum, and it seems very little experimentation has been done to implement new methods. All these have resulted into students' growing restless and feeling disinterested with the course material. Use of popular movies can be of great help in this context.

In recent years the entertainment industry has witnessed an incredible growth of multi-channel cable television networks which includes a host of movie channels. If shown on the computer screen with the help of TV tuner card, these movies can be copied very easily. Movies can be viewed or downloaded too from the internet. Though this copying or downloading of movies is violation of copyright act, the fact remains movies can be possessed quite easily these days. At the same time, the movies have become easily portable in CDs, DVDs, pen drives and external hard discs which are quite cheap. Thus movies has become as the original copies and almost free in the pirated and/or downloaded versions. Screening of movies have become much more easier too: on the computer/mobile screen itself for a limited number of audience and LCD projector or smart board can be used for a larger audience and better effect. All these factors have made movies much more accessible to people these days than they were previously. It is now a reality that people and even ordinary middle class people are able to have a domestic movie library of their own quite easily. These movies can be used to teach English language to the learners of advanced classes.

II. A REVIEW ON PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Discussion on probable use of movies or motion picture in increasing the effectiveness of education has been documented for the first time way back in 1926, when cinema as a piece of art and entertainment was still in its cradle. A.L Young in his article *Teaching With Motion Pictures* mentions that Thomas A. Edison was once quoted by the media as saying that

“eighty-five percent of all acquired knowledge comes through the eye, and that, because of this fact, moving pictures would within decades revolutionize educational methods by supplanting both teachers and textbooks (Young 321).” This, of course, never happened, but it emphatically shows how the eminent scientist viewed the role and importance of motion picture in education. While it will be unnecessary to go into the details of Young’s April 1924 experiment on certain students’ pace and extent of learning a lesson of history with and without educational film, the author, however, in this article concluded that cinema might be used as a “supplement” and not as a “substitute” for traditional educational methods (Young 321). He opines that “Learning is a process affected by all the senses (Young 326).” He emphasises on the “supreme value” of motion pictures as forms of instruction in which “motion, processes, scientific phenomena, and the like are involved (Young 324).” However, for the case of ELT, the author argues that motion pictures “seem to offer little or no advantage” to the teaching of “English, and language (Young 326).” Young, in as early as 1920s, when cinema was less refined, less available and costly, was not aware of a possible relationship between cinema and effective language teaching.

In 2006 Professor Larry M. Lynch, Intellectual Development Specialist, ELT Teacher Trainer, and professor at a university in Cali, Colombia, has contributed to this field of potential and effective ways to use of cinema in ELT in a series of short articles. His first article is *5 Reasons to Use Popular Movies for English Language Teaching*. His 5 reasons, which are given in bullet form followed by a very brief discussion, are (1) Movies are widely enjoyed, (2) Movies in English are easily available, (3) Movies are available in different movie formats, costly and cheap, (4) Length of viewing is controllable, and finally (5) Use of sub-titles and close-captioning. In the last point Lynch advocates the use of “sub-titles in English not only provides listening comprehension support, but aids in vocabulary development and reading comprehension as well.” As the learner advances in her/his studies, these aides will be gradually turned off, making room for the teacher to remove the handicap she/he may have originally provided.

Lynch’s second article is *5 Ways to Use Popular Movies for English Language Teaching*. In this article the author attempts a slightly more in depth look at how film can help teachers with yet another five point list. Lynch’s 5 ways are (1) Varieties of English can be demonstrated, (2) Slices of culture can be demonstrated, (3) Movies depict some of the differences in language including the “historical change” of language and provide a portal of insight into the confusing issue, (4) Using Audio-Visual elements can aid learning and finally (5) Movies are great fun to watch.

III. TEACHING-LEARNING POINT FROM CINEMA

So what exactly are the areas of language teaching which can be learnt from cinema and not from classroom lectures and text books? Movies enrich the learner’s learning experience by bringing the concepts out of the classrooms and into working reality.

Out of four skills of language proficiency i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening, the one that is most neglected in our language teaching curricula is listening. Movies can provide sufficient exposure to this language skill of listening. Moving pictures accompanying the speech can provide sufficient aid to equip the listening skill. Even the scrolling subtitles at the bottom of the screen can provide further aid for the learners who are less advanced or less equipped. Listening comprehension can be a test for listening skill which could also be held on a movie (or a clip of it).

Our learners are rarely exposed to connected speech in their normal classroom language activities. It is again cinema which can provide them that.

Movies do display certain integral characteristics of language which cannot be present in textbooks. These are certain expressions of human feelings: love, affection, hatred, anger, sarcasm, happiness, sadness, humour, and the like. The expressions of these feelings and its associated intonation can be best learnt from the movies. Classrooms and formal textbooks are not exactly the best place to learn different non-formal expressions, colloquial terms and usage, slangs which are again integral part of a language system. It is cinema once again which can expose learners to this kind of use of language.

It is again movies which can provide exposure to the students about the existence of dialects. In a country like ours where the English teachers themselves are non-native speakers of English who in most cases lack sufficient English speaking skill and who speak in their respective regional varieties of Indian English, it is cinema which exposes the learners to different national and international Englishes and dialects. They get exposed to different standard and non-standard

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dialects based on geographical locations, class and professions of the concerned users or time periods they are being used. While it is hardly ever possible for a non-native learner of English to learn and use more than one dialect, movies at least introduce him to the existence of such a huge range of dialects. Thus, films can prove to be a useful supplement to the standard practices in the English educational realm.

Lynch claims in his second point that different “Slices of culture can be demonstrated.” Different traditions of different cultures sometimes lead to different expressions or terminology for different types of English speakers. Movies portray these differences to some extent and offer a threshold of insight into the issue. This also includes the “historical change” of language which is Lynch’s third argument. Different vocabulary, colloquialisms, and grammar were often associated with older styles of English. Movies based in an older period often include some of these issues (Ways).

Lynch also believes that “Using Audio-Visual elements” aids learning. Lynch cites H. Gardner and D. Lazear who demonstrated through research that “an audio-visual approach” could be “highly effective in both lowering learner affective filters and in language acquisition and learning.” Lynch says that all types of learners “receive, process and acquire communicatively-based language elements quite readily from films.” Whether someone compares a word they hear to the spatial surroundings, or refers what is being said to a certain tone presented in the music, people are able to find a deeper understanding of the language being spoken (Ways).

Above all however, for Lynch the most important reason why motion pictures have such a powerful effect on students is the fact that “Movies are great fun to watch.” It is nearly impossible to teach an inattentive student. Lynch argues that “Movies can offer a welcome respite to "normal" class room activity while still continuing to promote English language skills acquisition and practice.” For him, “A thoughtfully chosen film (or clip thereof) can breathe new life into a class of the most reluctant learners.” The fact that Motion Pictures are a form of entertainment, allows for the classroom experience to transcend the boundaries of academia and entertainment (Ways).

IV. APPLYING CINEMA IN THE LESSON PLAN

Thus while it is quite evident that film is a viable teaching tool, not much research has been carried out in its utility in the teaching language. If one is willing to accept this challenge of using movies in teaching language, the question then becomes how? How, with the apparently never-ending catalog of films and possible methodologies, does a language teacher choose films and use them successfully in the teaching programme?

In educating English as a second language one of the major confines teachers face is finding parallels/equivalents between words in the learners’s native tongue and the terms ascribed by the English speaking world. Film is able to ease this issue in many ways. Films include subtitles that can be displayed in various languages. Showing the movie-clips in combination with unknown terms allows the student to connect the context clues of the visual scene with the translations supplied by the subtitles to make educated guesses about what the word uttered may mean. Still, different words and concepts are going to be difficult to understand by different groups of students.

Let’s consider a movie such as *Titanic* (1997, directed by James Cameron), an enjoyable film that includes romance, class issues, some comedy, action, and ethical issues which may touch the current student community. The teacher can show the entire film on the very first day of teaching this unit at the classroom. The students will enjoy the film as a piece of entertainment; the more they enjoy the film, the more willing they will be to find intrigue in the lessons prepared. The film should be played in all English and the students are to be instructed to note the unknown words and unfamiliar concepts. After the film is complete, the teacher lead a discussion in class about what the film was about. This will reveal the level of comprehension that the students in the classroom have before proceeding further. The students should be encouraged to come out with strong opinions, favourite scenes, and difficulties.

Once a list of scenes is prepared which includes ones that students have a lack of understanding and ones high in entertainment value, the class can now switch over to a more instructional format. Lets consider the sequences where (a) Jack saves Rose from committing suicide followed by misunderstanding and the prize dinner for Jack and where (b) Rose sees the sketches by Jack on the deck of the ship. After the sequences are played through, start a discussion about what the students now think the specific words and expressions mean. Finally after the students make their final assessments have them look the word or words up in the dictionary, and explain any disparities between their assessments and the dictionary definition. This activity will build vocabulary, comprehension skills, and even help in problem solving through context clues, the skills helpful in participating in discourse. This activity can be used for as many words and concepts as

the teacher finds fit to teach the students and can be repeated at least once to strengthen the understanding of the vocabulary and skills learned in figuring it out. These scenes bring up emotions of sadness, pathos, tactics, anger, humour, sarcasm, happiness, humour and the like, the emotions present in everyday speech. These issues are often not explicit and may even change the meanings of words and phrases. It is almost unfeasible for conventional lecturing and text books to express how, for example, sarcasm works. It is cinema and television that present opportunities to visually display how sarcasm works. Students can see and hear the body language, the facial expressions, and even the various tonal changes that are associated with sarcasm and a joke. A unit focusing on these issues would be particularly stimulating for students due to the fact that movies and television shows put across the most common examples of such dialogue, and are usually the most watched among younger people.

As mentioned earlier, another issue that non-native speaking students face problem with in the conventional teaching system is dialect. Whether it is the rural-speak of middle class country folk, or the vernacular speech of African Americans, the grammar and vocabulary used often differs from Standard English. Once again, film is able to display these differences. Many movies reveal these different vernaculars and lesson plans can easily be prepared to make the most of this ability.

Other beneficial activities can be providing handouts to the class with questions such as; Why did a character decide to fight another character; what information does a particular give about his past; what do you think is the climax of the film and the like. Broad questions like these test the comprehension skills of students, and help them develop a keen ear for language. To expand this test of comprehension, the teacher can assign an essay for the students to write, helping them in writing proficiency too. The teacher must ensure that each film chosen for the language class requires different type of understanding including but not limited to movie reviews, argumentative pieces about theme or issue in movie, character bios, or alternate endings.

Debate can be another activity which can be useful for enhancing comprehension and argumentative skills further. The students could be split into groups who can be asked to argue their feelings on an issue portrayed in the movie, and this exercise will help developing sentence structures and thoughts. This will help the student to think on his own and be trained to develop his/her words in a articulated and natural way. It is one thing to learn a language technically and another to learn it in a way one can speak actively in a conversation in a consistent manner. All these exercises will help the students of rural India to build argumentative skills, writing skills, creativity, and listening comprehension.

V. CONCLUSION

In the context of English teaching in Rural India, using cinema as a teaching resource is a rather new concept. Though this paper has attempted to outline a few possible means of utilizing this entertaining yet effective tool in teaching language, there are many other potential that can be explored. The key to using film in teaching is including quality and meaningful post-viewing discussion and activities. The exercises must involve discussions of the meanings of words, terms, and concepts and presenting the students with activities that engage them in the process of comprehension. In developing new and innovative teaching processes, teachers need to keep a creative mind while remembering to always allow open discussions in the classroom. While this paper has attempted to answer the "How" in using film in teaching language, it simultaneously has reinforced reasons to "Why." With so much possibility for creating new methods and module, film is really the educational format of the future.

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