

On the features and advantages of English films in web-based and resource-driven learning

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Abstract: English films integrate locales, voices, images, plots, and characters. Some have text captions. They are normally regarded as a carrier of public entertainment. But in web-based and resource-driven English learning setting, the role of English films is not just to entertain the public, but to activate the background knowledge stored in the learners' brains with their Visual-spatial Intelligence and deepen their understanding of the language and its culture through remembrance, association and reconstruction. The outcome is to transform the linguistic and cultural input into an effective learning output.

Keywords: Web-Based, English Film, Input, Storage, Schema

1. Introduction

Film is considered to be one of the most dominate art forms of the twentieth century. It is normally regarded as a carrier of public entertainment. However it records, describes and visualizes the language and its culture through images and sounds. In web-based and resource-driven learning setting, the role of English films is not just to entertain the public, but to activate the background knowledge stored in the learners' brains with their Visual-spatial Intelligence and deepen their understanding of the language and its culture through remembrance, association and reconstruction.

There are normally several common misconceptions about English films, regarding the contents, the different social values, the harms of pornographic scenes to the teenagers, among other things. Doughty pointed out, "Without doubt, film is the most powerful medium society has for influencing mass audiences: hence the 'moral panics' orchestrated by establishment figures and gatekeepers of public opinion in the early days of the cinema." (2009) Much Chinese audience, especially the elderly, reject English films because the narration of some stories is not developed chronologically, which always makes them puzzled or confused. Some can not accept the theme or judgment conveyed by the Hollywood films due to different social values. Admittedly, when English films are used as a carrier of public entertainment, the audience's

worries are acceptable. Atwood once suggested that "if pornography of the violent kind depicted these acts being done predominantly to Chinese, to Blacks, to Catholics, it would be off the market immediately, under the present law." (81) But when they are utilized as an auxiliary tool of web-based and resource-driven learning, the situation is different, for the selection of English films is made by learners' own choice and based on their own interests or hobbies. What's more, the goal is clear: to learn the language and its culture, not just for fun. It is characterized by contextualized and goal-oriented learning. It is well accepted by those who are interested in "edutainment" (educating entertainment) because it is time-saving (without going to a cinema), economic (without paying money for a ticket), optional (there are so many films to choose) and flexible (any time, any place). It's suitable for a variety of English learners and learning situations: academic, industrial and self-study.

2. Features of Web-Based and Resource-Driven Learning

Web-based and resource-driven learning refers to an online learning activity which is supported by multi-media and other related information technology. The learning environment embodies six distinctive features: dynamic, pluralistic, attractive, comprehensive, extensive, and flexible, etc.

- Dynamic--English learning materials provided by networks can be updated in real-time;
- Pluralistic—Information sources are from all aspects of society, providing learners with opportunities to be exposed to pluralistic cultures;
- Attractive--Learning materials and methods are apt to create a pleasant atmosphere, to stimulate and motivate learners' interest;
- Comprehensive--The use of visuals can, in general, help learners to predict information, infer ideas and analyze the situation that is created in a film;
- Extensive--The breadth and depth of learners' participation in English learning activities can be extended. The extension of breadth is reflected in the coverage of social interactions. The extension of depth is reflected in the richness and integration of information sources on the network environment;
- Flexible--Learning material can be googled, retrieved and digested repeatedly; and learning time and place are adaptable to a learner's individual schedules.

In terms of its advantages, some researchers (Wilson) pointed out "Video is at best defined as the selection and sequence of messages in an audio-visual context. Considerable confidence is placed in the value of audio-visual aids to enhance the learning of foreign languages". There are two main advantages of English film: Strengthening linguistic and cultural input, activating a schema.

3. Identifying the Advantage of Strengthening Linguistic and Cultural Input

An investigation of the effectiveness of using an advance organizer to introduce video in the foreign language classroom conducted by Herron, Hanley and Cole pointed out "Theorists today stress the importance to foreign language acquisition of providing the language learner with contextualized and meaningful input." (190) The advantages of English films in English Language Input are embodied mainly in the following three aspects:

3.1. *Creating an Original Ecological Environment of the English Language*

Ben-Shaul pointed out, "Film is a medium with a peculiar realist capacity to bring forth hidden or overlooked aspects of reality through its moving, audiovisual recordings of appearances. This is derived from the medium's way of producing images and sounds. Differing from even the most accurate of painting, film images result form a mechanical process of reproduction without the need for human intervention in the recording process itself. This process results in moving images and sounds that resemble better than any other medium the way humans see and hear their surroundings." The monologues, voice-overs and dialogues of the characters in English films create pure

English-language environment. A more likely or possible language scenario about other people's lifestyles helps learners easily gain access to associational and cognitive status, overcoming anxieties in in-class English learning. The basic elements of the language: vocabulary, phonetic sounds and grammar constitute the advantages of the language input.

3.1.1. *To Memorize and Use English Vocabulary More Accurately*

Some English films provide text captions below the screen. They are the primary sources of learning English. The captions may contain a number of new words. Without explanation, learners may understand or interpret the meanings according to the context or situation. English films set specific background and scenes, describing story lines, characters, and their interrelation in voice-overs. The locales presented by a film are very specific and clear, easy to learn or memorize the collocation of the words. While in linguistics, collocation is an important part of the study of semantics which is also difficult for Chinese learners.

3.1.2. *To Imitate the Phonetic Sounds More Thoroughly*

English films create an authentic audio-visual environment. The characters' dialogues, monologues and voice-overs have changes in pronunciation, intonation and rhythms as the thoughts or moods of characters' get extremely excited or sad, including a rising or falling intonation, linking of sounds, losing plosives, weakening, voicing, stress and other changes, which can help learners to distinguish the subtle differences in pronunciation, intonation and rhythm.

3.1.3. *To Learn Syntax More Easily*

While enjoying an English film, learners are not only attracted by the descriptive pictures of the scenes, but also impressed by the verbal communication (i.e. characters' dialogues, monologues and voice-overs) and the non-verbal communication (i.e. action, movement, facial expressions, body language, eye-contact etc.). Text captions, voices and images stimulate their brains through the multimedia devices simultaneously, making learners keep firm and long-lasting aural and visual memory traces in mind as if they were personally on the scene. Compared with the traditionally syntactic lecturing of English, learners seem to be more acceptable and understandable of the syntax of English because audio-visual context appears to be more direct and informative. It makes an English learner feel like getting inside a character. At the same time, learners are more likely to read between the lines of the dialogues, and to experience a clever blend of the structure function and pragmatics function of the language.

3.2. *Creating Opportunities of Exposure to Different Cultures of a Target Language*

Language and culture are interwoven. It is difficult for English learners to understand and accept a heterologous culture, but English films work particularly well for

shaping and reflecting a certain society's values and ideology. "For Deleuze, the moving film image is not an image of something but it is that something as image, knowable through affect...Film is an idealization and mystification of reality. Far from revealing any truth about the world, its apparent mystery was lauded and positioned as unreachable to human knowledge." (Ben-Shaul, 2009) Like Vertov, Benjamin thought of film as a truth machine potentially revealing scientific-political aspects of social life.

For example, "Hollywood" has manufactured for the human race a massive collection of spectacular realities. The most common themes in American films describe an opinion about society, human nature, or life in general, most probably focused on the same social value or judgment—"American dream" which contains several core elements:

- 1) It offers everyone the chance of success.
- 2) Success depends on ability and effort rather than family and background.
- 3) Everyone has the right of equality and freedom.

The connotation of "American dream" reflecting in Hollywood films is "good vs. evil", "love conquers all", "triumph over adversity", "individual vs. society", "battle", "death as a part of life", "revenge", "loss of innocence", "man vs. himself", "man vs. nature" etc. such as personal success in *Forrest Gump*, individualism in *Erin Brockovich*, freedom & equality in *Brave Heart*, and individual heroism in *Die Hard*.

With the visualization and concretizing of cultural images, the cultural significance becomes clear and intuitive, resulting in psychological recognition. The plot and theme of English films tell the audience a story of a particular historical period and culture, which not only arouses their sensory awareness, but also promotes them to reflect what different culture means to different people after experiencing cultural shock because the scenes, props, art, costume, etc. are the real visual and analogous reproduction of a specific historical period of a society, conveying specific cultural meaning in a certain locale. When the abstract cultural connotation and cultural images are transformed into physical images, learners are imperceptibly influenced by a large amount of perceptual knowledge about the history and culture of the specific society represented in the films. With the visualization and concretizing of cultural images, the cultural significance becomes clear and intuitive, resulting in psychological recognition. Meanwhile, excellent English films perfectly interpret the survival of specific populations and the values of a particular historical period of a country as viewed from politics, economics and social conditions, which helps learners to have a better understanding of the spiritual essence of human beings. Under the guidance of the photoplay, learners may explore the notion of culture and social significance through critical thinking, avoiding one-sidedness of the heterologous culture.

4. Identifying the Advantage of Activating Schema in the Spatial Intelligence Storage

Brown pointed out, "Howard Gardner (1983) advanced a controversial theory of intelligence that bellows apart our traditional thoughts about IQ. Gardner describes seven different forms of knowing which, in his view, give us a much more comprehensive picture of intelligence." (93) He explained that Spatial Intelligence meant the ability to find your way around an environment, to form mental images of reality, and to transform them readily. According to Howard Gardner, "Central to spatial intelligence are the capacities to perceive the visual world accurately, to perform transformations and modifications upon one's initial perceptions, and to be able to re-create aspects of one's visual experience, even in the absence of relevant physical stimuli." (173) Schema was first proposed by psychologist Kant in 1781. This previously acquired knowledge structures are called schemata.

Film transforms cultural connotation and cultural images into physical images, which, to some extent, arouses some learners' spatial intelligence storage, and activate background knowledge with the pre-existent schema, namely, the linguistic schemata (i.e. the linguistic knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, idioms and so on), the contextual schema, the formal schema (i.e. the type of "formal logic" thinking, using conjunctions or logic connectives in the representation of the logical relationship), cultural schemata, acoustical and intonation schema, etc. Based on the understanding of the words, symbols, patterns, and the rich reserve of images, learners may reconstitute or recreate correct images by activating the background knowledge stored in their spatial intelligence, connecting the existing knowledge (known knowledge) with the new knowledge (unknown knowledge), thus transforming the unitary language learning to multi-cultural exposure and absorbing. Through intentional or incidental stimulation, learners' minds work and emotional activities not only develop their communication ability, but also help them to have a better understanding of abstract knowledge restricted by their personal experience or beyond the horizons of their existing knowledge.

Studies have shown that linguistic intelligence exists in the left hemisphere of the brain, spatial intelligence in the right hemisphere. When a message stimulates the both sides of a brain, learners' comprehension, the effect of memorization and the innovation capability will be greatly enhanced.

In order to further demonstrate the effectiveness of watching English film, I pursued my intended study on the 36 sophomores from the same English major class of Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages in the autumn term of 2011. The class was divided into two parts: experiment participants and non-experiment participants. The experiment participants were those 19 sophomores

who took the elective course English Film Appreciation. The non-experiment participants were the rest sophomores who took the other elective courses. The statistics is based on the outcome of TEM-4 (Test for English Majors-Grade 4) which was held nationally in April, 2012. The table of the comparison of TEM-4 scores of the undergraduates of English majors from Class 5, Grade 2010 of YUFL is listed below:

Table 1. Comparison of TEM-4 scores of Undergraduates of English majors from Class 5, Grade 2010 of YUFL

Group Classification	Average Score	average growth
Experiment participants /19 students (12 students)	63.8	+5.5
Non-experiment participants /17 students	58.3	

(Notes: the total testing scores of TEM-4 is 100 marks)

From the data statistics above, we can find that average total score of the students from the experiment group is higher than those of the non-experiment in the same class in TEM-4. The lecturer who teaches the elective course English Film Appreciation provides experiment participants with both lectures and seminars. It's important for them to get prepared before the class. They have to do some reading around the subject focusing on such areas as: the director, the movement, genre and national context. They need to search the internet for relevant material relating to what they are about to study and watch some of these films relevant to the units in their own time. Some even go to the library to track down these books adapted by the films, write up their lecture notes and organize handouts etc. For them, the primary purpose of selecting this course is out of the passion for the subject. But later they find it a good way to communicate with peers. Compared with the non-experiment participants, they read more English material and expose themselves more to the English listening and speaking environment during the process to prepare the lectures and seminars. They read a lot, so they enlarge their English vocabulary and fasten reading speed; they watch a lot, so they improve listening capability. In the end, English film helps them to broaden their horizon. Most of them develop the interest of watching English films, which will be beneficial to their whole life.

5. Strategies

“Photography and the cinema are discoveries that satisfy our obsession with realism.”(Wood, 2012) For English learners, what really obsesses them is not only the essence of the film, but also the passion or desire to get familiar with the language and culture of English speaking countries. The strategies of transforming the linguistic and cultural input into an effective learning output are listed in the following three aspects:

5.1. In the Areas of Language Input

Film represents a wide variety of topics in history, philosophy, religion, science and the humanities. It is important for language learners to set criteria for selecting a good film worthy of watching. When English film is used as learning material, learners need to consider the following four aspects: the language content should be precise and informative; its ideology should be positive and healthy; its dialogues should match learners' English proficiency; the plot should be close to real life.

5.2. In the Areas of Language Process

Learners should overcome psychological barriers. Taking part in English situational role play with peers is a good way to improve English, for the changes in voices, tones, language flows, speed, rhythms, word stresses etc. are important elements in imitation. With the aid of the acoustical and intonation schema, learners may follow or imitate the characters' lines to simulate the contextual schema, text structure schema and cultural schema, which plays a vital role in developing learners' listening and speaking abilities.

5.3. In the Areas of Language Output

English learners should focus on self-expression. English film offers learners a chance to improve their ability to understand comprehensible input. The ideology implied in the specific cultural context of English movies is personalized, diverse, multi-dimensional and dynamic. The tasks should be multi-layered in order to exploit all of the information and elements contained in the aural and visual texts, such as background introduction, thematic discussion, motion-picture review, feed-back exchange, etc. These activities are aimed at training learners' language skills and deepening their understanding of the cultural connotation of films.

6. Conclusion

“Film is limited to a shorter narration than the novel; however, it naturally has pictorial possibilities the novel doesn't have. What can't be transferred by incident might be translated into image.”(Monaco, 2013) Film focuses on hidden details by exploring commonplace milieus which are familiar to English learners under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film. On the one hand, it extends their comprehension of the images and sounds; on the other hand, it stimulates their imagination of a different nature, an unconsciously penetrated space which is attributed to the features and advantages of English film. The images and sounds of English film activate their linguistic and cultural schema and deepen their understanding of the language and its culture through remembrance, association and reconstruction. The outcome is to transform the linguistic and cultural input into an effective learning output.

When English film is used as an auxiliary tool of web-based and resource-driven learning, it not only creates an original ecology of the natural language environment for English learners, but also provides a variety of language learning material. Learners may perceive and memorize the text captions, voices and images through auditory and visual perceptions. The language materials are repeatedly digested, processed, transformed into the long-term memory system, and ultimately internalized in the learners' knowledge structure. It proves to be an easy and effective way to "pick up" the language in a natural context. Frequent and persistent practice and training of watching English films help learners improve their cross-cultural communication.

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