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THE USE OF FILMS AS A STIMULUS FOR THIRD (FINAL) YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS OF ENGLISH TO LEARN VOCABULARY

The article stresses the importance of films in English in learning vocabulary and describes a film experiment I carried out at the Teacher Training College in Chełm, Poland. Watching films in English turns out to be a strong motivation for most college students of English to learn the language (mainly vocabulary).

Introduction

Foreign language learners get a stimulus to acquire a foreign language more willingly when it is presented in a lively manner through the medium of film, television or video (Tomalin and Stempelski (1989:3)). In terms of language, it is vocabulary, not the other language components that is the primary and indispensable vehicle for communication. As Wilkins (1972:35) observes: *Without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.*

One of the ways to learn or teach vocabulary is through film, which is more attractive and appealing to foreign language learners than the traditional handbook. Students who have not purposefully viewed a film with the original English soundtrack before, consider the task to be more pleasant, satisfying and easier than studying texts because they wrongly understand watching movies as an activity requiring far less effort than reading. While learning vocabulary *per se* cannot be, as Spaulding (1992:89) points out: *intrinsically motivating*, learning it for a specific purpose, for instance to understand a film, can be motivating enough (Ur 1996:277). Still, this activity requires a lot of effort on the part of the student learner. He or she must be in possession of a sufficiently high degree of language competence and a well-developed skill of comprehension, regardless of the medium through which he or she acquires vocabulary. Accordingly, attractive as film-watching might be, it cannot be

perceived exclusively as demanding far less work involved, but equally laborious in comparison with studying texts.

The basic division of films

Allan (1987:19–22) makes a division of film material on video into material specifically designed for English language teaching and material basically meant for native speakers rather than English language learners. This material includes feature films, plays, soap operas and sitcoms, which are produced specifically for entertainment.

There exist various criteria according to which moving pictures can be selected for presentation in the classroom (see Massi and Merino (1996:21); Doye (1998:60–61)).

Aims of the experiment

The objective of my experiment was to test the linguistic competence of third year students of English, the degree to which they acquire vocabulary while watching a film in the original language version without subtitles as well as to increase their motivation to watch films in English. Secondly, my research focused on the assessment of mostly passive viewing comprehension skills of the teacher trainees. Thirdly, it was laid out to bring out their viewing habits, preferences and opinions.

The experiment

The experiment was composed of two parts: a 30-minute show of an English film in the original without subtitles, followed by a survey to be done within the remaining 60 minutes left until the end of the class.

My criteria for selecting a film

In choosing a moving picture for the students to watch, I followed criteria of my own. Firstly, in view of the fact that the British cinema is definitely far less known than the American cinema, I chose a British film. Secondly, at college and university level in Poland, a British accent is the most widely acceptable standard. Thirdly, I based my choice on my own personal preferences. The film the students watched was an episode titled *Major Star* from the *Blackadder* series, starring

Rowan Atkinson. Admittedly, from the methodological point of view, *Blackadder* is far from suitable for the purpose of English language teaching. However, an unquestionable advantage of it is that the story itself unfolds in chronological order, is well-told and most of it is presented on the screen. The theme of the Great War and British participation in it may be too difficult to process by Polish students (even teacher trainees) as they may lack in enough cultural knowledge of that period of history. The disadvantages are that only some characters speak clearly, while others do not; almost all of them speak very fast, many characters using slang or a dialect. There are virtually no breaks to give viewers a rest. Overall, the film is indisputably very demanding in reception.

The necessity of introducing purpose-oriented tasks

Donley (2000:24) observes that watching video films in English solely for enjoyment is a passive activity and, therefore, in that case learning as such barely takes place at all. Allan (1985:48) supports the view that watching should be done for a purpose because minds are active then. She stresses the importance of pre-viewing questions and post-viewing tasks as purposes. To make learning active, Donley (2000:24–26) advocates using pre-viewing, viewing and post-viewing worksheets together with discussions. Similarly, Allan (1985:37–43) proposes a set of viewing techniques and tasks, designed to encourage learners to watch the film more attentively. These include pre-viewing and post-viewing activities like silent viewing, viewing without picture, jigsaw viewing, etc.

The pre-viewing stage

Before watching the film, the students were briefly notified that they were supposed to do a post-viewing activity afterwards, namely, the survey. More importantly, they were given no specific tasks to focus on. While the students did not have any particular purpose-oriented tasks to do, they had a rough idea that some purposeful post-viewing activity would be required on their part since they had already been told about the survey following the film.

In fact, there was a number of purposes indirectly laid down for them. First and foremost, since the students were English teacher trainees, their command of English was expected to be at an advanced level, and so was supposed to be their level of comprehension. As would-be teachers, they were supposed to be ready to hear and listen to different varieties of English in real-life surroundings without prior preparation. Thus, they were totally immersed in genuine spoken English, exposed to different voices and accents, just like native speakers. Allan (1985:36) calls it *a language bath*.

The post-viewing stage

To most students the film came as a shock because they had not expected the language to be so difficult to understand. However, they had intentionally been made to experience that shock in order to increase their motivation to watch more British and American films in the original and make them more habituated to that end. Then, the students were asked to do the vocabulary part of the survey consisting of randomly chosen vocabulary items, mostly single words and simple phrases. The students were to briefly explain their meaning in their specific film contexts. Not surprisingly, in a majority of cases the students have failed to give the right definitions of most of the vocabulary since they have either missed or misunderstood them. Most students have only provided the meaning of the more familiar items whose meaning they probably knew before viewing the film. However, the fact that such a great number of them have not got the vocabulary right should not be a discouraging factor even for advanced learners of English since even native speakers may miss a certain number of words or phrases, but still be able to follow the plot and get the gist of the story.

Without a clear vocabulary-oriented pre-viewing task for the students to do, the characters' language and tempo of speech have made it impossible for the trainees to recall almost any other words and phrases than the vocabulary specified in the survey. All of them admit it is extremely hard to do in a film requiring a native speakers' level of comprehension. Finally, the students were requested to write about their vocabulary learning habits as well as views and preferences about films in English in general. Eventually, apart from increasing their motivation, greater interest in the history and culture of Great Britain was to be aroused in them.

The degree of vocabulary acquisition

When the teacher trainees passively watch films in the original with subtitles, **36%** of them declare that they listen to the English they manage to hear in between the Polish speaker's lines, and try to understand as much vocabulary as possible without reading the subtitles all the time. The vocabulary items they usually remember are single colloquial words and short phrases (more often nouns and verbs rather than adjectives) as well as ones that are in some way funny, unusual or original, for example, informal, slang, strange-sounding or swear words. Very little do they remember whole sentences, even short ones. The students usually have recourse to a dictionary to look up both the meaning of a word or phrase and its context (**56%**) or only its meaning (16%).

However, **28%** of the students do not check vocabulary items after watching a film. The most common reasons for that are:

- forgetfulness (10%),
- certainty about its meaning (8%),
- no knowledge of the spelling (8%),
- laziness (7%).

Still, they remember the film components in the following order of importance:

- the general atmosphere (24%),
- the plot (22%),
- the characters (21%),
- the message (18%),
- the vocabulary (**15%**).

Vocabulary is acquired to a very limited extent in the comfort of one's own home, in front of the TV, at the cinema or even in the classroom if there is no pre-viewing activity before a film show. Therefore, the conclusion to be drawn is that to reinforce vocabulary in class, it is indispensable to set pre-viewing target techniques and tasks, for example focused on specific vocabulary items, thus making students watch films more attentively.

Students' viewing habits and preferences

In the case of *Major Star*, **95%** of the students have found it generally funny because of:

- the characters' speech and behaviour (37%),
- the British sense of humour (30%),
- funny dialogues (22%),
- the amusing plot (6%).

The remaining **5%** do not consider it to be funny at all.

Generally speaking, the film seems to have appealed to the majority of the teacher trainees in terms of linguistic and cultural content combined. Curiously enough, only **7%** of them have been able to give a short summary of the plot. The remaining **93%** have instead provided:

- no summary at all (60%),
- only a part of the plot (20%),
- a review (8%),
- only a general outline of the plot (5%).

The frequency with which they watch films with the original English soundtrack is the following:

- not at all (**43%**),
- very rarely (38%),

- usually once a month (10%),
- very often (9%).

57% of the students prefer to watch American films since they are more popular and easier to understand than British ones. Others (**39%**) relish British films because they display a British accent and are more sophisticated as well as full of the British sense of humour. To the remaining 33% of the trainees, it makes no difference whatsoever whether they are going to watch a British or American movie.

40% of the trainees remember the plots of some of the films they have watched, whereas the remaining **60%** claim they do not. The kinds of films they usually watch range from comedies, thrillers and action films to documentaries, romantic films and sitcoms. Some of the favourite titles of films they have seen include: *Pride and Prejudice*; *Allo, Allo*; *Matrix*; *The Titanic*; *American Beauty*; *Breaking the Waves*; *Private Ryan*; *Monty Python*; *X-Files*; *The Mummy*.

The show of that particular film has in most cases (**83%**) increased the students' motivation to watch more British and American moving pictures for the following reasons:

- to learn English vocabulary (37%),
- to improve one's English in general (22%),
- for entertainment (10%),
- to improve one's listening comprehension (8%),
- to learn about British and American people and their culture (4%),
- to improve one's pronunciation (4%).

However, the remaining **22%** of the trainees claim that they do not watch films with the original soundtrack because:

- they have enough motivation already (14%),
- such films are too difficult to follow (8%).

Conclusions

In conclusion, film plays a significant role in foreign language teaching. Through the medium of film, foreign language vocabulary can be acquired more or less effectively. To achieve a higher level of vocabulary acquisition in the classroom, it is necessary to introduce pre-viewing or post-viewing task-oriented exercises. Especially, tasks set before the viewing stage make learners concentrate on the film they are going to watch, thus increasing their ability to get specific information, for example, vocabulary items. By contrast, passive viewing is not conducive to acquiring vocabulary whatsoever. Even advanced learners like English teacher trainees do not normally remember vocabulary. Therefore, particular words and phrases need to be reinforced by means of information-gathering tasks, like worksheets, before viewing the film.

The acquisition of vocabulary by foreign language learners is considerably easier in the case of watching English language teaching materials, which have been specially prepared for educational purposes. Undoubtedly, learning new words from moving pictures originally made for a native audience may pose a certain comprehension problem for non-native viewers, which may consequently lead to frustration or discouragement. Fortunately, it is not essential to understand every single word or phrase in a film to be able to provide the main points of the plot.

Even though non-educational moving pictures with the original English soundtrack, like feature films or documentaries, are likely to be difficult for foreign language learners to understand, they have some advantages as well. First of all, in a majority of cases, learners are provided with a stimulus to acquire new vocabulary through the medium of film, not exclusively through text study or listening comprehension. Similarly, in that way non-native viewers learn something about the history and culture of England, the United States or of other English speaking countries. However, in comparison with educational films, non-educational ones supply a substantial amount of authentic language. The foreign language learner appreciates the fact that he is treated on the same level as the average native speaker, that is to say, he is exposed to real-life English, spoken in everyday contexts. For him, it surely is a gratifying experience.

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Appendix

The film selected for presentation:

- Boden, R.** 1990. *Blackadder Goes Forth: Major Star*. London: BBC Enterprises Ltd.