Teaching Composition for EFL Beginners Using Film

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Abstract

Communication with a second or foreign language is distributed over four modes, two receptive (listening, reading) and two expressive (speaking, writing). We can classify these modes as oral (listening, speaking) in contrast to literate (reading, writing). However, the use of written language actually dominates the classroom (blackboard, presentations, textbooks, etc.). So it is not really possible to delay L2 literacy. Instead, literacy must be taught and evaluated from the start of instruction. Beyond everyday literacy, teachers can introduce students to more academic writing--e.g., going beyond the ubiquitous 'personal essay' and, instead, writing an essay from primary sources. One type of academic writing that many EFL teachers have a background in is literary analysis. This paper is about how films and their screenplays are appropriate authentic materials for EFL beginners. It will cover the use of modern, robust and readily available techniques and technology to teach realistic writing tasks for beginning-level young adult and adult learners and consists of the following: (1) literacy skills and writing tasks; (2) typical needs and wants of learners; (3) explanation of the basic types of writing tasks for beginners; (4) a set of tasks that introduce to students writing about film and literature, including advanced organizers (e.g., semantic maps) and multimedia (e.g., DVDs). The goal is to demonstrate how teachers can create and conduct tasks that enable beginning-level learners to write about film and literature (e.g., a critical response to a dramatic film). The aspects of literary analysis that are taught include character analysis, plot summary, character development (as a function of the plot), theme, and a considered, critical response to the film or story.

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In language teaching, communication with a second or foreign language is thought of as distributed over four modes--two receptive (listening, reading) and two expressive (speaking, writing). Sometimes these modes are classified as oral (listening, speaking) in contrast to literate (reading, writing). The reality in EFL teaching and learning, though, is more complex and problematic. First, the modes of fluent communication are not necessarily useful categories for teaching and learning the L2. Second, in real communication, the modes are mixed and complex. For example, the learner--as a language user--may be required to respond both orally and in written form to input that is both spoken and written (such as when they attend a class or lecture). Third, SL or FL learning may not progress anything like the course of language and literacy development for native speakers of a language (who acquire since infancy much of a language outside of formal instruction). A fourth factor is the dominant use of written texts at the very beginning level of second and foreign language learning. It is for such reasons that it is not really possible or desirable to delay literacy (receptive reading or productive writing) in an L2 just so that the language can be orally acquired first. Therefore, language teachers need to introduce, teach, and evaluate literacy tasks for their learners from the very start of their L2 learning. This workshop and its corresponding paper will look at ways to use modern (but robust and readily available) technology and infrastructure to plan, manage and evaluate realistic writing tasks for beginning-level young adult and adult learners.

Specifically demonstrated will be the use of advanced graphic organizers (e.g., semantic maps, etc.) and multimedia (e.g., DVDs) to create and conduct tasks that go beyond the near universally done 'personal essay'. These tasks will support and enable beginning-level learners to write about film and literature (e.g., a critical response to a dramatic film), an academic style of writing that uses primary sources. The aspects of film and literature that are taught include character analysis, plot summary, character development (as a function of the plot), theme, and a considered, critical response to the film or story. Film then is treated largely like narrative fiction for the purpose of these writing tasks. Film, it is argued, makes a great introduction for EFL learners to beginning-level academic writing tasks, and is especially close to literary analysis.

Robust and pervasive technologies for recording, storing, copying, playing, editing, and otherwise manipulating video have been adopted in educational settings around the world. In the digital age, these include CDs, DVDs, Blu-ray discs (BDs), compressed MP4 files, multimedia-capable computing devices, and stand-alone playback devices. Adding to the convenience, some of the current technology can even be used to play, copy and convert to digital form legacy content, such as older collections of analog VTRs into a library of DVDs, BDs, or folders of ISO and MP4 files stored on a computer or 'cloud' drive.

Such pervasive, usable technologies make adapting video and film as materials for the EFL classroom more tempting and appealing than ever before. This paper corresponds to the workshop of the same title and  reviews and expands on some of the possibilities for the use of video to create language learning tasks and activities, even at the beginning levels--such as, (1) movie tie-ins with bilingual screenplay books for extensive reading; (2) DVDs and BDs with multilingual subtitling for extensive listening and discussion; and (3) a writing task that can even

be adapted to low-beginning level students—such as the film review in short essay form.

## Resources

For an example of some of the possibilities, it is useful to look at a large EFL market--Japan. Japan comprises a huge market for books and multimedia, such as DVDs and BDs. These are typically published in Japanese for the almost-128 million native speakers and readers of the language in the domestic market. However, there is also a strong interest in the books, films and TV programs of other countries, including, of course, Anglophone countries, especially the US and UK.

One type of book that caters to the desire of many Japanese to watch foreign films in the original language (usually English) is the bilingual screenplay, which presents the dialogue of the film in both written English and Japanese. These commercially marketed screenplays also provide extensive explanatory annotations about vocabulary, idioms, cultural items, and history, all pertaining to the content of the film. These are available from a number of publishers with nationwide distribution, including Fourin / Screenplay, Nan'undo (a prominent publisher of college textbooks as well), Kokusai Gogakusha, Cosmic (Cosmic Mook), Takarajimasha, and Cine-script. Sourcenext, a software publisher, provides inexpensive language-study programs that run on computers, tablets and smart-phones, with key features for language learners like content from popular films, bilingual subtitles, and language practice exercises tied in with the content and language of the film. Some of the commercially marketed screenplay books come with their own DVD for personal viewing; these feature older films that are in the public domain (although what is considered public domain in Japan and Asia might be contested in other countries).

Outside of publishing for LT and LL, it should be noted that many foreign films and TV programs (and even some Japanese titles, such as Ghibli anime) are available on rental and retail DVDs and BDs, and these include many films and programs with both subtitles in Japanese and English. One interesting development has been the appearance of many films on DVD and BD with multi-lingual features--Asian languages because discs made in Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan are marketed elsewhere in Asia, but also European languages because Japan is part of Region 2 for coding (the same as the U.K.).

One basic use of the sort of screenplay books available in Japan is to assign them as textbooks. (If screenplay books are not available in a specific country, many screenplays and scripts are available for download over the internet.) In class or as homework teachers can assign them for extensive reading and/extensive viewing practice. If a teacher wants to show all or parts of a film in class, it might be best to stay with the older films in the public domain. With such films there are usually no copyright issues for public showings or copying for classroom use. In Japan, the bilingual screenplay books that are for the older, public domain films typically include a DVD with the book, so the student has easier access for personal viewing.

DVDs and BDs often include multi-lingual features, such as English and Japanese sub-titles and close-captioning for the hearing impaired. The versatility and flexibility of these technologies is a considerable advance over the previous generation of VHS and digital VCDs. Such multi-lingual features allow the teacher to play the film with sub-titles in the students' first language, or English, or no sub-titles at all. The language features of the disk can then be used to complement the texts of the screenplay books.

**Short Film Review**

One practical task requires students to write a short essay reviewing a film that they have seen. This is good practice for the short essays required on some language tests, and it is also a good introduction to writing about literature, since many of the same elements (e.g., character, character development, plot, theme, climax, etc.) have to be discussed. If students are at a beginning level or have never written a short film review before, the teacher might need to provide considerable support to get them started and prevent them from becoming too frustrated at such a challenging task. For example, the teacher could break the entire exercise down into a series of tasks that build up until it is time to require the students to write the review. It is also helpful to choose a film with 'literary qualities', which does not necessarily mean an art film. For example, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Mulligan & Pakula, 1962)  is a classic film that adapts and dramatizes much of the modern classic novel of the same name, but it is very much a conventional Hollywood film of the 1960s in terms of its construction. Two other films with literary qualities available on mass-market DVDs are *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra & Capra, 1946) and *Anne of Green Gables* (Sullivan & Sullivan, 1985). Also, all three of these films have corresponding bi-lingual screenplay books available in Japan (*It's a Wonderful Life*,  Capra, 2008; *Anne of Green Gables*, Sullivan, 1996; *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Foote, 2011).

**Short Film Review Task 1**

See Figure 1 below. This task requires the students to watch a sufficient part of the film and then list the major characters using the conventions of the movie review (i.e., the character's name and then the actor's name in parentheses after it). This can be done as individuals, pairs or small groups, and then as a whole-class exercise to make sure everyone has a complete and correct list.

**Short Film Review Task 2**

See Figures 2 and 3 below. These tasks continue with the enumeration of the characters, but in these students are also asked to describe and analyze each character. The last part of the worksheet in Figure 2—explaining how the character develops and changes by the end of the film—requires that the students watch the film at least once to the end. This worksheet is only designed for the description and analysis of one character. One way to do it is to have students work individually, in pairs or small groups, completing a worksheet for each major character. An alternative method is to assign a different character to each group and then have them share their results (e.g., making enough photocopies of each completed worksheet so that all the students have completed worksheets on all the characters). The task in Figure 2 requires students to attribute traits to a particular character and then find evidence for those traits in the film or screenplay. Basically, the evidence is based on (1) what the character does, (2) what the character says, and (3) what other characters say about the character.

**Short Film Review Task 3**

See Figure 4 below. This task is the last preparation task and prepares students to write their film review. A typical film review includes a plot synopsis that is sufficient in depth and length to explain to someone who has not seen the film what the 'problem' of the film is. The worksheet asks the students to list these elements: the key events, they key events that comprise the 'rising action', the key events that comprise the 'climax', the key events that are the 'falling action' leading to the conclusion, and finally the key events of the film's conclusion. If more space is needed, students can continue on the back of the worksheet,  or the teacher can make prints that concentrate on separate elements of the plot.
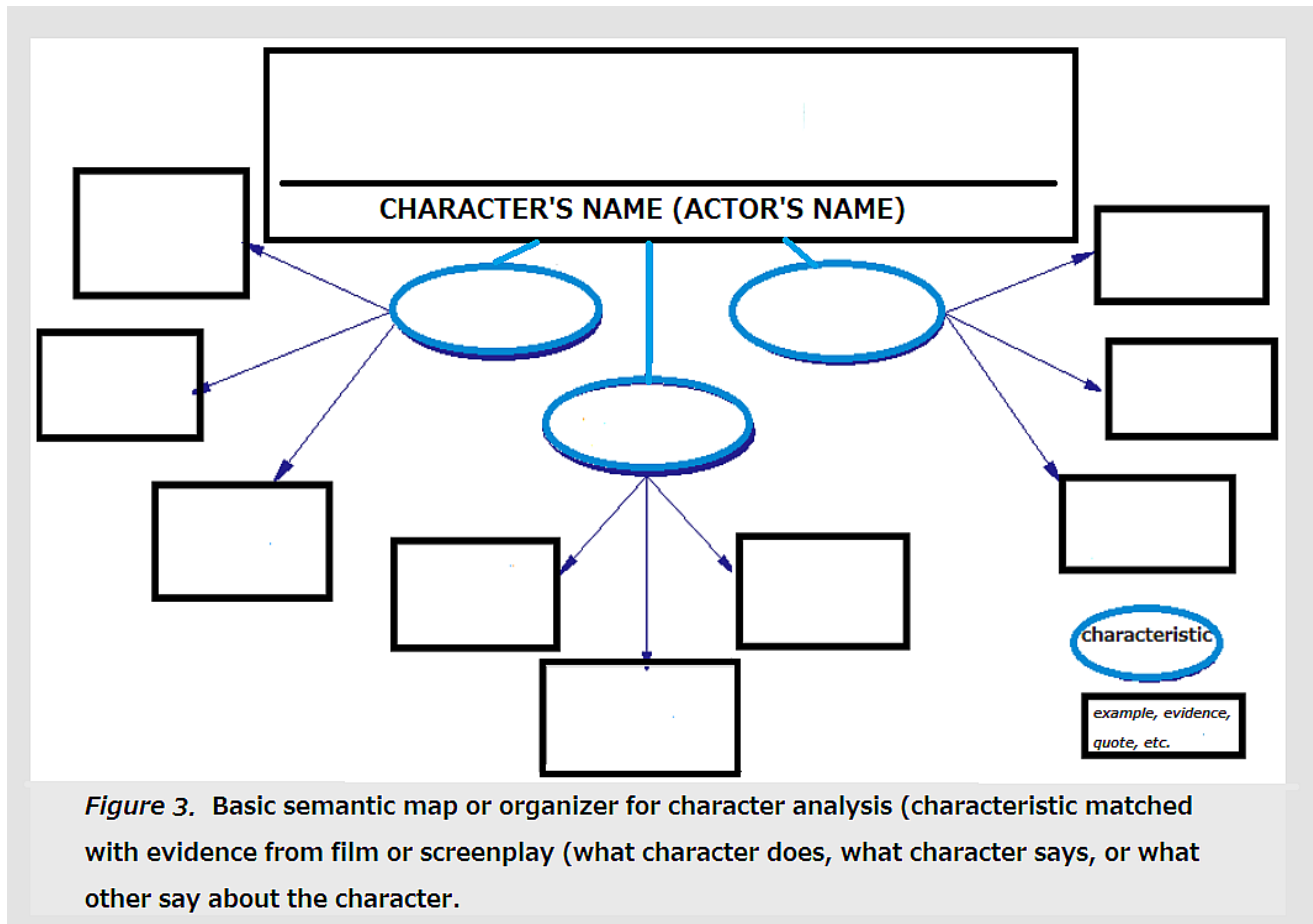
**Short Film Review Task 4**

This task requires the students to use their notes and their knowledge and experience of the film that they got from viewing it in order to write a short  review. Typically the review is 5-10 paragraphs long and informs the readers about the main characters (and the actors who play

**LIST OF MAJOR CHARACTERS IN THE FILM**

**CHARACTER NAME (NAME OF ACTOR)**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

*Figure 1.* Template for listing the major characters in a film (and the name of the actors).

**CHARACTER ANALYSIS WORKSHEET**

Name of character (Name of actor)  :

_____

What does the character look and sound like?

What does the character say, think, feel?

How does the character change by the end of the film?

*Figure 2.* Simple writing task for character analysis.

**CHARACTER'S NAME (ACTOR'S NAME)**

characteristic

example, evidence, quote, etc.

*Figure 3.* Basic semantic map or organizer for character analysis (characteristic matched with evidence from film or screenplay (what character does, what character says, or what other say about the character.

them), provides a plot summary related to the theme or problem of the film, and explains what the author thinks of the film (good or bad), usually by answering a question like, "Should the reader see this film too? Why or Why Not?"

**Conclusion**

Recent technological developments--like DVDs, BDs, compressed MP4 video, and multimedia-capable computers, tablet PCs and smart-phones, etc.--make the use of film and video content for language and cultural study more convenient and versatile than ever before. This article has only touched upon the many possibilities for using film and video in the EFL

classroom. However, teachers should consider expanding the use of video beyond narrow,

# PLOT SUMMARY WORKSHEET

**III. CLIMAX**

**II. RISING ACTION**

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

etc.

**I. KEY EVENTS**

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

11. _____

etc.

**IV. FALLING ACTION**

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

**V. RESOLUTION**

*Figure 4.* Plot summary diagram.

intensive listening practice and language study--especially if course structure, institutional constraints, and the needs and interests of students allow for it. For example, they might consider adapting some of the discussion and writing activities explained here, even for beginning-level learners.

One alternative is to use film and TV programs that are of a documentary nature instead of narrative. Here the possibilities expand into areas that address student needs beyond writing about literature. For example, the film documentary, *Supersize Me* (Spurlock & Spurlock, 2004), which has a bilingual screenplay available in Japan, can be used as the basis for learning and practicing the sub-technical English vocabulary concerned with health and nutrition. So too would the documentaries *Food, Inc.* (Kenner & Kenner, 2011) and *King Corn* (Woolf & Woolf, 2007). Writing tasks about these films could center on having students produce a short review essay. But they would have to deal more with summarizing the science of these films in their reviews, and not elements of literary analysis.

Finally, with classes and students for whom the main focus is not short-essay writing, written tasks might still be appropriate--just not as ambitious. For example, after watching a dramatic film, students could be asked to complete a written task where they write a short review of the film. The review should incorporate character descriptions and only a very small amount of the previously completed plot summary for the writer to say why they did or did not like the film and why. For example, they can answer the question:  Why would they recommend the film (or not) to a friend to view?

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