

Teaching Writing Skills Through a Silent Movie : An Experiment

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Abstract: *English has emerged and continues to grow as an important language of communication in India. It is, however, taught in majority of the classrooms with emphasis on its linguistic properties, i.e., phonological, lexical and grammatical. What needs to be emphasised is the communicative approach so that the focus is on the meaning rather than on the form of the language. For this, negotiated interaction between learners in the classroom needs to be facilitated. This paper highlights the use of movies as texts to enhance communicative activities for language learning. It brings out the effects of using movie in an experimental study with a group of high school students showing a high degree of motivation for the film. This interest was sustained subsequently by the class by involving the students in activities related to the development of writing skills. Given the results of using this technique, it is recommended that an experimental study be conducted to see the effect of using a film for development of speaking, listening and writing skills. This can be tried with pre-primary and primary groups as well.*

We present this study here for two reasons. Though the study is based on classroom situation, the medium used is the movie which lends itself freely for distance teaching and learning. The other reason is that, given proper thought and the necessary instructional design, writing skills in English can be taught through distance mode, and in this effort, the movie/film could be an effective tool.

Introduction

English has become the main language in almost all domains of life and India itself has emerged as one of the biggest consumers of the English language market outside the native speaking English world. There are at least twice as many English using Indians today than there were two decades ago (Chaudhary, 1994). Everywhere, in every walk of life, sometime or other, Indians hear or answer in English and they need a communicative language to comprehend, manipulate, produce and interact. In short, English is no more a subject to be learnt but a skill (reading, writing, listening and speaking) to be practised and developed.

Our Traditional Classroom

Till today, our language classes are in the traditional mode and require learners to pay

attention to specific linguistic properties (phonological, lexical or grammatical) in order to learn them or to practise using them more accurately. Further, more concentration is on completing the syllabus or textbook before the forthcoming examination. In such situations, though the teacher knows the importance of providing varied learning situations for the students, she is tempted to find an answer to her problem in the traditional text book with its real classifications, its generalizations, its provision of mechanical exercises designed for application of the rules, but divorced from context and therefore devoid of meaning. This is why language learners who are familiar with the grammar of a language, and know a vast range of vocabulary may still fail, i.e., let themselves down in real communication. Students hailing from a rural set-up are no exception and they are sailing in the same boat.

The Needs of Today's Learners

Today, language learning is seen as an activity which involves students as complex human beings, and not simply as language learners. What needs to be done is to capitalize on their experiences and incorporate them into a more environment-sensitive communicative approach. Students need practice in the specialized skills that determine communicative competence, i.e., reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Hence, our real challenge with respect to English language teaching emerges when attempts are made to find effective ways of preparing students for spontaneous communication. Communication tasks are the ways that will develop learners' communicative skills and contribute to their linguistic development. In other words, communication tasks are important for both 'fluency' and 'accuracy'.

Communication Tasks

Communication tasks have been defined as tasks that involve the learner in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focussed on meaning rather than form (Nunan, 1989).

Communicative Language Teaching

Since the day and age we have started hearing about communicative language teaching, curriculum planners have been pre-occupied with communicative syllabus design; material producers have flooded the textbook market with books carrying the label 'communicative'; testing experts have come out with batteries of communicative performance tests; teachers invariably describe themselves as communicative teachers. Thus, theorists and practitioners alike almost unanimously emphasize communication of one kind or other. But the emphasis on communication seems to slacken, however, where it matters most: in the classroom because the belief that language is learnt only from books dies hard. This continues to act as a stranglehold on much classroom procedure resulting in frustration and confusion of pupils.

The communicative classroom must be genuinely communicative by creating learning opportunities in the class. Teachers and learners should be co-participants in the generation of classroom discourse. 'Negotiated interaction' between participants must be facilitated. 'Negotiated interaction' entails the learners' active involvement in the discourse features as clarification, confirmation, comprehension, requesting, repairing

and reaching. The learner should have the freedom to initiate interaction and should not just react and respond to what the teacher says. The teacher should provide enough data that would activate the intuitive heuristics of the learner, so that she can internalize underlying rules from their use in varied communicative contexts. Further linguistic input should be presented to learners in units of discourse so that they can benefit from the interactive effects of various linguistic components.

These strategies can be brought into the classroom or study centre, using various techniques like discussion, relaying instructions, communicative games, problem-solving, talking about oneself, simulation and role-play, filmstrips, cricket scoreboards, etc., that demand a great deal of initiative and free responses from the students.

Feature Films as Text

Feature films are part of everyday life and one of the most easily accessible. They are contextually rich sources of authentic material. They are fun, but it does not mean that they do not have a pedagogic value. They open up new medium for the language classroom, arouse high levels of motivation and result in a most satisfying learning experience (Voller and Widdows, 1992).

When students participate in activities in which they have involvement, they would achieve well and, no doubt, today, film industry is the best attraction for students. Feature films can be used to exploit students' effective and intellectual resources as fully as possible and can be linked to their continuing experience of life.

Rationale for Selecting the Movie

The movie selected for this innovative practice was "Pesum Padam" (Speaking Picture) directed by B.C. Gowri Shankar and acted by Kamal Hasan, Amala and some others.

It was a film by the famous star of Tamil Nadu with nationwide fans. An English movie, if selected, would not have been easy to follow because of its accent.

There was no dialogue or speech in the film and hence the influence of mother tongue in learning the foreign language was controlled. Since it was a silent movie there was no need to worry whether the various language speaking students of the class could understand this movie. So, irrespective of their mother tongue, all could follow it. This film itself could not be categorized as a Tamil, English, Telugu or a Hindi movie.

Above all the 'silence' was golden in not disturbing the neighbouring classes! Though without speech, it was not slow moving but active and realistic. Hence it was interesting. It paved way for unrestricted imagination of the students. It did not assume detailed background knowledge of a subject or culture, which the students did not have; it had a strong story line and clearly drawn main characters.

The quality that added a feather to its cap was that there was no vulgarity in it that would deter the suitability of the film to be screened inside a classroom or school. It was about a poor, unemployed graduate who becomes rich, but returns to his own home leaving all luxuries. In addition, it was a colour film and one could hopefully believe that this film could be geared not only to the competence but also to the expectations of

the Higher Secondary students, participating in the learning process. Hence this film was selected for maximizing the learning potential—writing skill.

Objectives

The objective of the innovative practice was to facilitate English language learning. The skill to be developed was writing. The specific objectives were

- 1) to enable the students to interpret the film; and
- 2) to help them express themselves in grammatically correct English.

Method of Introducing the Movie

Initially, the film was viewed by the investigator and the important themes, character development and other essential elements of the film as a whole were noted down. Scene-specific questions and worksheets were prepared (Appendix A).

After finishing all the formalities like getting the acceptance of the head of the institution, this innovation was introduced for a group of 15 girl students in XI standard. The students were prepared before viewing the film, with some questions about their favourite film, film hero, actress, etc.

Then the movie was segmented into seven parts of 20 minutes duration, with the natural breaking of the story. After showing each 'chunk' the students were given the balance time in a 45 minutes class for note-taking and discussion, and the worksheets were completed.

At the end of the week, i.e., after viewing the whole movie, a discussion about the film was conducted. Students were given activities in four groups for the next one week. For the first three days activities on writing skills (and the last three days activities on speaking skills) were given. In each class, the students themselves discussed in groups under the supervision of the teacher, who clarified and confirmed the facts and came out with the solution of the activity. The leader of each group read the paragraph written by them. Then follow up programmes were organised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The learners throughout the week were active and not just reactive in the English class. A high degree of motivation among learners was created and sustained. The same feature film was used for developing both writing and speaking skills in different classes. Students' involvement was shown by their interest and enthusiasm in writing the activities which was absent throughout the year in other classes. It was quite different from the usual composition classes in which they used to struggle with the routine unfamiliar topics.

Even those students who used to keep quiet in other classes were observed to be involved in the discussion and the teacher could win over the 'silent students' with the 'silent movie'. To conclude, the class showed that films could arouse high levels of motivation resulting in a satisfying learning experience.

Teachers, who have reservations about spending so much time preparing and using such 'uncontrolled' 'non-academic' material should be made aware that free communicative activities are potentially much more efficient, and are also appreciated more by the students.

The same innovative practice could be brought into use with the primary and pre-primary schools with the help of cartoon films of Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, etc. Some documentary films like 'Don't play with fire' would be informative to the students and at the same time provide a real language learning experience. This practice may be used for developing all the skills of communicative competence. Teacher educators could make their trainees aware of these practices. An experimental study could be conducted to find the effect of feature films on speaking, listening and writing skills. A comparative study of different aspects and different skills also could be carried out.

Above all, the examination pattern which is a nightmare to the teachers as well as the students, has to be reformed so that teachers can have some freedom from the real-world constraints. The present study would be of some help in that direction.

Though an English teacher behaves not only according to the needs of language learning, but also according to the norms set by other subjects, introduction of the feature films as text is an improvement upon previous methodologies; and further improvement can only be achieved by further development and not by going back. Research and accumulation of experience through language teaching must always go on side by side, and as far as possible, inform each other. In the context of multimedia based distance open learning, too, the potential of the film will be recognised more and more.

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APPENDIX–A

Worksheet

Note down the various characters

What is Kamal in this movie ?

Note down the features of city life.

What are the problems of our nation as depicted in this film ?

Why does he (Kamal) get half-tea ?

How is the value of the degree certificate shown ?

Why does the beggar show Kamal the money ?

Why does Kamal go to the shopping complex ?

What is shown by the long queue in front of the employment exchange ?

Who is Amala? What is she? What are her parents?

Where does Kamal meet Amala?

Why does Kamal lift the rich man?

Why does he bring the tape recorder to the lodge?

Who is Pratab Pothan?

Why does he want to kill the rich man?

Why does Kamal return to his own place?

What does Amala write to Kamal?

APPENDIX-B

Activities

Imagine yourself as Kamal and what would you have done with the rich man, if you were in Kamal's place?

What would be your reaction if you found the murderer in your home?

What would have Kamal and Amala talked when they went for shopping?

Write a letter to your friend about the magic show you have seen in the movie.

Why does Kamal return to his own house, leaving the luxuries?

Write a review of this film for a daily newspaper.

Why did Pratab Pothan want to kill the rich man? What might be the relationship between them?

Write a paragraph about the technique used for murdering.

Talk a few sentences about your favourite scene.

Give a talk on the techniques of the film.

Suppose you are a witness to the murder. Say a few words as a witness.

Suppose you are meeting a relative of the rich man. Tell him about his drunkenness.

Suppose you are invited to this film function to give a talk about the film. Give a short speech about that.

Imagine you are accompanying your friend to a shopping complex. What would you talk?

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