



Online Instructional Tools for the Wireless Generation

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Abstract

This article deals with the use of movies, TV commercials, and songs as instructional tool for EFL students and explores their features and benefits impacting students' motivation, language acquisition, and discussion and critical thinking skills. The use of the media enhances students' learning environment. The paper elaborates the media selection and proposes points to consider when using the three media in classroom.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ได้สะท้อนการใช้ภาพยนตร์ โฆษณา และเพลง เพื่อใช้เป็นสื่อการสอนสำหรับนักเรียนที่ใช้ภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ รวมทั้งได้สำรวจลักษณะและคุณประโยชน์ต่างๆ ที่ส่งผลต่อแรงจูงใจ การเรียนรู้ทางภาษา และการอภิปราชยและการคิดอย่างมีวิจารณญาณ การใช้สื่อภาพยนตร์ โฆษณา และเพลงช่วยส่งเสริมในการสร้างสรรค์สร้างบรรยากาศแห่งการเรียนรู้มากขึ้น ถือทั้งได้กล่าวถึงการคัดเลือกสื่อต่างๆ ตลอดจนนำเสนอประเดิมในการพิจารณาเมื่อใช้สื่อเหล่านี้ในห้องเรียน

Introduction

College students are in the "wired" generation, acknowledging online media most appealing, and sending instant messages or chatting online as their common daily routine. Before unknowingly welcoming the uninvited media to silently bombard and manipulate themselves, these repositories of media should be utilized to enhance students' abilities in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and especially critical thinking. It is a teacher's challenge to embed such skills into student learning through media familiar to them. Such media can be used not only to students to expose to real-life scenarios and real-used language, but also to develop their life-time abilities to discern facts and bias, question hypotheses, assess alternatives, overcome hidden deception, artistically solve problems, justify their beliefs and values, make use of and build knowledge and experience, and indulge themselves in learning. Three of top-hit online instructional tools used in EFL classroom proposed are movies, TV commercials, and songs, which can naturally and simultaneously create pleasant and meaningful learning settings.

Why movies, TV Commercials, and songs?

Common benefits

Movies, TV commercials, and songs share numbers of similar characteristics as useful and functional instructional tools for use in EFL classroom. A number of research have displayed benefits of the use of the three kinds of media.



According to King (2002), movies engage students' feelings and provide new views. Through an exploratory questionnaire after using a contemporary movie as an activity in class, an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data indicated that students perceived movies as a beneficial instructional tool like textbooks and lectures (Downney, Jackson, Puig, & Furman, 2003). Furthermore, Renzi (n.d.) examined seventeen articles written by instructors who used movies in their classrooms. They showed unanimous satisfaction with the advantages of such a movie-enhanced course. Renzi suggests that movies increase students' critical thinking skills, engagement, and active learning. They reflect real-life scenarios, which enhance students' skills in daily application. Moreover, movies can encourage group interaction. Similar to movies and songs, TV commercials offer many advantages as a resourceful tool, (Hatakeyama, 2009; Erkaya, 2005; Smith & Rawley, 1997). Visual literacy elaborates skills through signs, symbols, manners, and other non-verbal features of a message, including cultural values and attitudes. In the area of songs, Legg (2009) advocated that songs as instructional tool in the modern foreign languages (MFL) classroom could develop students' competencies, memorization, and vocabulary comprehension. There was relationship between music and concentration, and music and language acquisition. According to Li and Brand (2009), their study on Chinese college students learning English through songs showed high effective results in attitude and language acquisition. In the same manner as movie and commercial scripts, song lyrics are used to promote intercultural communication in ESL classroom. Brand (2007) also emphasized that the goal of English students should be to elevate their ability in cross-cultural interaction, not only ability in communication. In addition to the benefits of grammar and vocabulary learning, the mentioned media also enable teachers to explore the cultural and values elements, leading to further critical discussions.

The focus media become synchronic and ongoing instructional tools because they hold universal values such as relationship, friendship, or justice together with reflecting the lives of people at particular times. These can be practical

lessons. These self-access, multi-functional and affordable media can make a great snapshot available online or on YouTube - useful for both teacher and students to access in classroom or anywhere. The format also facilitates students to replay and recheck at specific points as needed. The media can also fill up the gap between generations, spark enjoyment, trigger interest and inspiration, and especially activate students' language mastery in a casual way. The multi-media enable students to expose real-world and cross-cultural settings where learning happens naturally. The promising result is sophisticated — to elevate students' all-round skills, particularly critical thinking. Movies, TV commercials, and songs can serve the ideal aim of education, which is to cultivate the whole person with knowledge and virtue.

Motivation

Attitude opens up the door to learning, as it ignites attention and promotes concentration, zeal, and joy of learning or even boredom (Burt, 1999). Movies, TV commercials, and songs provide a greater motivating atmosphere for English learning both in and outside classroom. It will be even more beneficial for EFL students. They become autonomous; desire to do, do on their own, and create their own English environment outside classroom. Assignments to watch a movie, listen to a song, or view a TV commercial anywhere at their convenience may drive students to search for meanings from Google or dictionary. Such endeavor comes from self-driven desire to know of what characters in the media are talking about. A number of studies concerning TV commercials showed (Davis, 1997) an increase in students' motivation to learn. According to Li and Brand (2009), there was a significant correlation between students' positive attitude and learning English through songs. The media accelerate response and fantastic experience in classroom after 30 seconds of listening to music, or watching a TV commercial or a movie clip.



Language acquisition

In the area of language learning, movies, TV commercials, songs, together with music videos, as entertaining visual and auditory stimuli, are appropriate for today EFL students whose English proficiency is considered limited. Once students are interested in class, language comprehension and acquisition take place naturally through understanding the grammatical structure, vocabulary, facial expressions, gestures, and all hints revealed in movies, TV commercials, or songs and music videos. Thai students tend to expose, focus on, and speak written English unknowingly. However, they are exposed to conversational and spoken language through movies, TV commercials, or songs. It is unlike textbook-oriented approaches where form, rather than essence, seems more emphasized. Furthermore, students come across lively and everyday languages, jargons, accents, trendy words and phrases, and dialects. Skills, such as reading, listening, speaking, writing, and critical thinking can be put into practice.

Language learning can be simply acquired through a movie as mentioned in www.eslnotes.com.

"In the synopsis for Forrest Gump, the students learn that "I have to pee" is "to urinate," which is certainly worth knowing. But you may want to add that "to take a leak" is the most common colloquial alternative to the above mentioned phrase (at least for American males!)..."

In the same fashion, TV Commercials are a rich source of vocabulary presented in memorable contexts not always found in textbooks as stated by Smith and Rawley (1997) as the following:

"For example, "hair conditioner," "aroma," "four-wheel drive," "grab on to," "wow!" A 1993 commercial for J. C. Penney's department store provided an interesting study of the word "line" by presenting a variety of idiomatic expressions in which "line" can be used: "think along these lines," "big lines," "small lines," "top of the line," "step over the line," "line up," and "the bottom line." Commercials can

introduce students to abbreviations and acronyms used by native speakers: AT&T, MCI, FTD), "Let's have subs and suds."

"The language of commercials is often in dialog form that exposes students to slang, different language registers, reduced speech ("wanna," "gonna," "gotta"), idiomatic expressions, and features of intonation and stress common in the speech of native speakers."

Likewise, song lyrics are implanted within a culture, what is valued and what is symbolized. Therefore, students being exposed to song lyrics, according to Brand (2007), can be taught vocabulary, grammar, rhythmic speech, phrases, and meanings together with culture. Evidence indicates that songs, especially pop songs, can be useful for ESL and EFL learners. First, according to Murphey (1990) 's analysis, popular songs use language with the similar level of 11-year-old native English speakers. Thus, it is ideal for non-native-speaking learners. Murphey (1990) cited power of songs stuck in the listener's head. Research in songs revealed that listening to repeated lyrics and rhythms promoted learning and memory of vocabulary together with other language acquisitions. In a study involving young learners of English as a second language, Hazel-Obarow (2004) studied both the short-term and long-term effects of music on vocabulary acquisition, and revealed that using music was more motivating for students and enabled them to engage in learning vocabulary. Ayotte (2004) noted that songs facilitate language acquisition in ESL/EFL classrooms. Moreover, he mentioned that EFL classrooms in Asia are often packed with numbers of students, dry testing and assessment regimes, and a heavy teaching of rigid grammatical rules (Brand, 2007). Songs used in language teaching offers more appropriate, motivating, and genuine English teaching materials.



Discussion and critical thinking skills

The subtle or obvious essence of the media, together with clues, becomes challenges for learners to discover hidden agendas, motives, culture, and belief. Brainstorming, exchanging ideas, and expressing personal preference evolve naturally. Students can learn to hear their own voice, listen to others', tolerate differences, and even advocate more than one voice at a time. Simple questions such as 'why?' and 'how?' can be practical to stir up something profound. Individual reflection to every single scenario can ignite debate, interaction, inspiration and application to everyday life. According to Ennis (1992), critical thinking as a responsive and sound thinking mainly serves the purpose of decision making in what to believe and to do.

Movies, TV commercials, and songs allow students to apply their schema and interests related to the content to construct new knowledge. The media generate active and reflective learning when students encounter complex situations, allowing reflection and argument in courses of action, and providing them with the opportunity to create and conclude resolution. Good movies, TV commercials, and songs are realistic, encouraging intrinsic motivation by provoking self-identification. Teacher as mediator plays a facilitator role to help self-actualization. Greater opportunities are available to motivate students with these instructional tools followed by increases in their understanding, independence, and information assessment abilities.

A picture of the socio-cultural context of the language students are studying can be shown through movies, TV commercials, and songs. Current and important issues to a society at a particular moment can be unveiled. Nowadays TV commercials disclose pollution, stress, competition, speed, materialism, plastic beauty, and real happenings in society. For example, a 1984 Apple commercial for Apple's Macintosh computer directed by Nicolai Fuglsig, from MJZ, won a Gold Lion in the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival and Grand Prix at the Midsummer Awards in 2006. The clip has received 1,674,657 plays on YouTube. It provokes the audience to think critically, differently, and deeply. The gist is as follows (Shontell, 2011) :

"A play on George Orwell's book, the Macintosh is portrayed as a means of saving humanity from conformity. The ad opens with a line of people marching in unison; they are interrupted by a woman (the heroine) dressed in athletic gear. She is chased by guards while carrying a hammer and a picture of the Mac.

She proclaims, "Our Unification of Thoughts is more powerful a weapon than any fleet or army on earth...We shall prevail!"

The commercial concludes: "On January 24th, Apple Inc. will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like "Nineteen Eighty-Four."

Another example is "Price Tag" by Jessie J or Jessica Ellen Cornish, this song reflects social value on money and provoke listeners to see other sources of happiness as followed:

(Verse 1):
Seems like everybody's got a price,
I wonder how they sleep at night..
When the sale comes first,
And the truth comes second,
Just stop, for a minute and
Smile!
Why is everybody so serious?!

Acting so damn mysterious,
You got your shades on your eyes.
And your heels so high
That you can't even have a good time.

(Pre-Chorus):
Everybody look to their left, (yeah!)
Everybody look to their right! (ha!)
Can you feel that? (yeah!)
We'll pay them with love tonight...



(Chorus:)

It's not about the money, money, money,
We don't need your money, money, money.
We just wanna make the world dance,
Forget about the price tag.
Ain't about the (ha!) cha-ching cha-ching.
Ain't about the (yeah!) ba-bling ba-bling,
Wanna make the world dance,
Forget about the price tag.

There are some generic questions to stir up students' discussion that can be asked of just about any songs, movies, or TV commercials as follows:

1. What is the theme of the song/ movie / TV commercial?
2. What would you do if you were?
3. What does the statement "....." mean?
4. What would your friends or people in Thailand think about....?
5. Do you agree with? Do you like.....? Why?

The mentioned media can be considered ideal tools for teaching EFL students critical thinking skills. A relatively short and propagandistic movie scene, a TV commercial, or a song is task-oriented, stimulating students to practice higher-order thinking skills. Producers, advertisers and composers depend on steering the thinking of consumers in the direction advantageous to them. For instance, they led us to association and identification with famous persons such as movie stars, public figures or celebrities by telling and showing us how to solve a problem or have a better living. Teachers can take advantage of movies, songs and commercials for classroom so that students will become critical consumers who can make reasonable judgments about the products, services, statements, and propagandas they daily expose through media. Moreover, the mentioned media short and complete format can be utilized to teach critical thinking skills; prediction, making connections, and analysis of cause and consequence.

Media selection

It is a challenge to choose clips that suit course objectives, class contexts and students' background. Anderson (1992) cited that propaganda could be found in the media. Movies, commercials, and songs can be distorted, partisan, violent, and manipulative. Thus, the teacher's hand pick is very vital. Realism, uncovering social and moral issues, is seen more in European movies than in American ones (Boyatazis, 1994). Contemporary movies, commercials and songs with universal themes are preferred because they are relevant to everyone, and easy for students to identify with. Some criteria to select movies mentioned by Burt (1999) are interest, theme, clarity, pacing, graphics, length of sequence, and availability. These criteria can be applicable to commercials and songs as well.

A well-selected clip, together with a stimulating question, triggers discussion and interaction. Well-known casts, contemporary visual and audio stimuli, closed captions, available scripts, easily-to-follow plots, and colloquial language contribute a pleasant learning atmosphere and enrich the development of information- processing strategies. However, watching movies, commercials or music videos without closed captions or scripts amplifies tolerance of ambiguity, augments guessing skills employing context clues, builds the skill in identifying key words and main ideas, motivates students to apply actual language, and enlarges students' sense of achievement and self-confidence. Different movies illustrate various themes. For example, *As Good As It Gets* promotes relationship, *Happy Feet* encourages courage to be one self, *Dead Poet Society* provokes different ways of thinking, *Most (The Bridge)* depicts moral dilemma, and *Chronicle of Nania* and *Batman* and *The Dark Knight* portraits good and evil ones. Thought-provoking TV commercials with different values enable students to have different perspectives. For instance, McDonald's, "The Showdown" depicts thinking out of the box, Apple, "1984" presents ways of different thinking, Monster, "When I Grow Up" encourages being different, and Greenpeace - "Alien Invasion" stirs up a sense of responsibility to society. Coca-Cola, "Mean Joe Green"



also promotes relationship beyond race and age. All of the mentioned TV commercials were guaranteed by recommendations and awards. Top-hit songs pointing out classic themes such as love and relationship are Lucky by Jason Mraz and Colbie Caillat, or Count on Me by Bruno Mars promoting friendship. Just the Way You Are by Bruno Mars touches on the issue of self-confidence. It is recommended that tasks after using the media as instructional tools be checking comprehension, evaluating, making judgments, integrating, relating information to personal values, and making comparisons.

Points to consider

Although movies are useful as an instrumental tool, it would consume hours to watch the whole movie, to explain vocabulary, structure, slangs, expressions, and discuss themes and meanings in class. King (2002) suggested four approaches to use movies in the classroom; 1) The sequential approach, or scene-by-scene, or one segment of the movie at a time, 2) The single-scene approach where a particular scene is used for the language instruction, 3) The selective approach where a few scenes are selected by the teacher from a movie, and 4) The whole-film approach where a complete movie is viewed. The single-scene approach is most recommended because there are constraints in class time and students' language abilities. For the teacher to spend class time wisely, students should be requested to watch the whole movie, study the movie synopsis, or general backgrounds prior to coming to class. Class time should be reserved for significant explanation on complicated language issues, and profound and meaningful discussion in order to fully promote critical thinking skill and to leave students eye-opening impression together with thought-provoking homework. Some thought-provoking movies carry hidden and profound treasures to discover and offer various aspects to concentrate and discuss in class like Green Mile depicting ethical dilemmas. Therefore, one area, one character, one particular statement, or one scene can be focused on and discussed. However, if one movie has been studied for weeks, student's zeal would be rarely found.

As for TV commercials, a challenge would be the language difficulty, especially without subtitles. Ambiguity in vocabulary can cause frustration to students. In the same manner as reading a textbook or in real-life situations, teachers need to closely guide students what vocabulary can be ignored or what should be focused. Generally, there are no subtitles or scripts of commercials. Teachers have to prepare scripts, so time for activity preparation is more consuming.

When popular songs are chosen, some students may feel too familiar, know their lyrics, and see through meanings. The use of such songs is neither motivating nor challenging, but boring instead. However, if old songs are used, there would be a sense of being obsolete, not classic, for most students. From my personal experience, success of using songs as tools would occur when songs are beautiful, meaningful, thought-provoking, clear to understand, contemporary, and relevant to students, together with interesting music videos. Personal preferences or taste of songs can be another issue to ponder what would work well to the mainstream. Learning and entertaining must be balanced. To be updated with what students like is not easy for some teachers who need to cross their border line to manage their class professionally and gracefully.

Conclusion

Movies, television commercials, and songs have much to offer EFL teachers and students. Their entertainment, conversational language, visual and audio impact, length, interesting vocabulary, and cultural and values elements can motivate and provide students with opportunities to improve their reading, writing, listening, speaking, and especially critical thinking, interpersonal, and discussion skills. These available media can turn into instructional tools through discrete selection and preparation of teachers. ♡



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