

MovieTalk: 25 Years Old and Still Going Strong

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As MovieTalk seems to be gaining in popularity within the TPRS and CI communities, I thought a quick review of its history might be of interest to readers of this journal.

The roots of MovieTalk go back to the fall of 1987, when the teachers in the Intensive English Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee were preparing for a fundamental change in program structure—from a traditional multi-level integrated skills approach to an innovative modular system that later came to be called “FOCAL SKILLS.” This new approach was designed to feature comprehensible input and authentic materials in all phases of instruction, with full-time instructional modules focused on listening, reading, and writing, in that order. (For details, see the [International Center for FOCAL SKILLS](#).)

Barb Wheatley and I were developing ideas for the Listening Module, which was meant to boost students’ listening comprehension to the low-intermediate level. We needed to find ways of presenting comprehensible aural input without relying on written materials for support, since many of the students might lack English reading ability. We were intrigued by the possibility of using ordinary English language movies, because they are authentic, enjoyable, and plentiful.

Our initial plan was to focus on dialogue, seeking ways to make it more comprehensible for the students. We chose “The African Queen” as our first project. The two of us wrote simplified dialogue and recorded it on an audio cassette, paraphrasing the actors’ lines. Barb spoke the lines of Katharine Hepburn; I used my normal voice for Humphrey Bogart and altered my voice in various ways for the other male actors. We did this for the entire movie. The audio recording was carefully constructed so that it could be played in synchrony with the movie. As readers can imagine, this work took many hours.

We field-tested our concept in two low-level oral skills classes. Our procedure was to show the movie in short segments, each played twice: first with the movie sound on, then with the movie silent and the simplified dialogue tape playing. During the repetition, we narrated the scenes whenever there was no dialogue. The students thought this was all a bit strange, but they seemed to like it, and their listening comprehension did improve noticeably.

Although this field test was somewhat encouraging, we had already realized that the amount of labor required to prepare and use the dialogue tapes was prohibitive. Furthermore, by this time it had dawned on us that our narrations were providing vastly greater amounts of comprehensible input than the dialogue could give.

Every language teacher knows how useful pictures can be in illustrating the meanings of new words. A movie contains thousands of pictures (frames) that illustrate many nouns, verbs, and adjectives. When we narrate a movie scene in clear, simple language, while pointing to various parts of the picture, we are providing

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vocabulary that corresponds to what the students are seeing. We are also modeling the common grammatical structures that occur naturally in our narration. All this adds up to high-quality comprehensible input embedded within the flow of a coherent, interesting story—which, in terms of Krashen’s Input and Affective Filter hypotheses (Krashen, 1982), should be ideal for language acquisition.

With narration assuming center stage, dialogue was relegated to a supporting role, requiring attention only when it was essential for understanding the plot of the movie. I calculated that I could meet this need on the fly during my movie presentation, by paraphrasing, pantomiming, or drawing simple sketches to clarify the meaning of important dialogue.

Armed with this new approach, I used “Rear Window” for my second field test, and it went amazingly well. By June 1988, when I taught the first FOCAL SKILLS Listening Module, I was using a technique that for all intents and purposes was identical to what we now call “MovieTalk.” (Originally, I called it the “FOCAL SKILLS Movie Technique”; I coined the name “MovieTalk” in 2009.)

MovieTalk, then, was originally designed for use in the Listening modules of pre-university intensive English FOCAL SKILLS programs, and my accounts of this technique, in various writings, presentations, demonstrations, and training materials, have always assumed this type of environment. (See the MovieTalk Tutorial link at the end of this article for a detailed description.)

The three essential components of MovieTalk are: selection, preparation, and presentation. Movies selected should be visually appealing, with an interesting plot that does not rely too much on dialogue. Preparation involves viewing the movie several times in order to divide it into coherent short segments, rehearse narration, and plan ways to deal with difficult dialogue. Presentation takes place in cyclic fashion: each segment is played once without interruption, then repeated with frequent pauses for narration, paraphrases, etc. During the repetition, the audio is normally allowed to play as before; it will of course fall silent when the movie is paused for narration. In cases when the teacher wishes to narrate during action, without pausing, it’s usually best to mute the audio temporarily.

No doubt there will be many adaptations and modifications as MovieTalk finds its way into more and more language classrooms. In public schools, for example, it will be important to select age-appropriate movies; and because of the shorter class meetings, teachers may find materials such as cartoons, television shows, and internet videos to be more useful than feature-length films.

The essential feature of MovieTalk is comprehensible input through narration of interesting movies. As long as this feature remains front and center, I believe MovieTalk will continue to be a productive and enjoyable way to teach languages.

I would like to thank Barb Wheatley for reading earlier drafts of this article and suggesting several improvements. I alone am responsible for any errors.

For further exploration

Articles

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Hastings, A. and Murphy, B. 2006. Making movies more comprehensible: the narrative/paraphrase approach. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching* 2 (1): 25-27. <http://www.tprstories.com/ijflt/IJFLTFall06.pdf>

Krashen, S. 1982. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon Press Inc. Internet edition (2009) available at http://www.sdkrashen.com/content/books/principles_and_practice.pdf

Other Internet Resources

International Center for FOCAL SKILLS. <http://focalskills.info/>

MovieTalk Tutorial. <http://glesismore.com/movietalk/>

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

– Nelson Mandela