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Using Literature and Movies for Integrated Skills Development in English Language Teaching

Betil Eröz, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

This article discusses the use of literary movies, that is, movies based on works of literature such as novels, short stories, or plays, in English language classrooms. Descriptions of several activities that work well with novels and movies are presented, along with some examples and guidelines for their use. These activities may be adapted for use with other works of literature and their corresponding movies. Finally, a list of titles available in both book and movie form is provided.

Literary Movies in the Language Classroom

Raising cross-cultural awareness and developing all four language skills are two crucial goals in many English as Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second language (ESL) classrooms. One way of achieving these goals is through using literature. Using literature in language classes has long been seen as an appropriate means of helping students master all four language skills as well as developing appreciation for the arts, building critical thinking skills, becoming more empathetic person, and increasing cross-cultural awareness. Literature can promote creative, communicative, and pleasurable activities whether one chooses complete works, such as novels, short stories, plays, and poems, or extracts from such pieces. One particularly effective means of incorporating literature in language classes is to use literary works in conjunction with movies based on those works. The most obvious advantage of movies is that they appeal to both aural and visual learners. Viewers can immediately see details of the historical or cultural setting that can be difficult to discern from reading along. For example, a movie based on a classic English novel will present students with a rich picture of the language, culture, and period in which the novel is set. When used effectively, movies promote vocabulary acquisition, generate real communication, and enhance reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills of ESL/EFL learners. With new technology allowing many language teachers to use multimedia resources in the classroom, movies are not as cumbersome or difficult to use as they once were. Depending upon the needs of a program and its students, several variations are possible for using books and movies. Among these are the following:

- using video clips in conjunction with reading the full text of a work of literature.
- reading extracts from a work of literature in conjunction with viewing a full-length movie (broken into segments, of course).

- combining movie clips with reading excerpts from the original work.
- working with full texts and full-length movie adaptations.

Each possibility presents the teacher with different advantages, possibilities, and challenges. In my position at Middle East Technical University in Turkey, I have primarily worked with complete works of literature and full-length movies. These guidelines have proved useful for choosing appropriate movies to accompany the texts that we read:

- The movie should be based on a novel or a story so that the students have texts to read as well as a movie to watch. They can follow the movie easily, enjoy the classroom discussions, and improve their language skills.
- The movie should be suitable to the age and proficiency level of the class. For example, an adult love story, a text with complex literary elements, or passages with long, elaborate descriptions may not be suitable for certain groups of learners.
- The movie should be free of cultural, ethnic, or racial biases unless the teacher wishes to draw attention to such features. This is especially critical and challenging in a multi-cultural classroom where the teacher must be sensitive to the views of all students.
- The movie should be a close version of the written piece. While it is nearly impossible to find a movie that follows the original text line by line, some are so unfaithful to the original text that they do not allow for meaningful discussion and comparison in class.

Sample Activities for Using Literary Movies

Three book + movie combinations that I have successfully used with my students include a murder mystery, *Murder on the Orient Express*; a British classic, *Emma*; and a contemporary American work, *The Accidental Tourist* (see appendix A for additional suggestions). Some common activities that work well with any book and/or movie, including these, are the following:

- preparing comprehension questions to guide and encourage students in their reading of each chapter.
- preparing vocabulary lists, activities, logs, or modified cloze procedures to focus on high use general or academic vocabulary.
- holding classroom discussions about the differences between the movie and the novel.
- asking students to keep a culture journal in which they write their reflections, questions, and assumptions about the country where the story is set.
- asking students to compare their culture with the culture depicted in the book and movie.

- asking students to write personal reactions to certain aspects of the book or movie to see how personal context influences the interpretation and analysis of a text.

Below are sketches of several additional activities that have worked well with the particular books named above. Most of these activities could be adapted for use with other movies and genres as well. The resourceful teacher will, no doubt, think of many other possibilities. All of these activities integrate the various language skills and involve listening, speaking, reading, and writing for engaging, communicative purposes.

Murder on the Orient Express is a famous murder mystery by Agatha Christie. In this story, her hero, the Belgian sleuth Hercule Poirot, helps the police solve the case of Count Andrenyi who is murdered on the Orient Express, a train which begins in Istanbul and travels through Europe. There are twelve suspects most of whom are related to the Count.

Activity 1: Focusing on Point of View

Students watch sections of the movie in class and read the corresponding chapter of the book for homework through the penultimate chapter. In class, they work in small groups to compare the movie and the novel. In addition, each student is assigned to focus on one character, Hercule Poirot or one of the suspects. As they read or watch the movie segments, they pay special attention to and gather detailed information about their character in order to answer three questions. Examples of the notes they might take are given in Appendix B. The questions are:

- What is your name and what is your relation to the victim?
- What is the evidence, if any, against you ?
- Where were you and what were you doing at the time of the murder?

Activity 2: Role Play

Just before reading the last chapter and viewing the corresponding segment of the movie, the students who were assigned the role of Hercule Poirot must try to determine the identity of the murderer. They have been taking notes about suspicious actions, examining the evidence, and preparing questions for the suspects based on what they have seen and read. Now, they follow these steps:

- Walk around the class with an information sheet trying to get as many clues as they can by asking questions.
- Have a short meeting to try to reach consensus about the identity of the murderer. In the mean time, other students also work in small groups to discuss who they think the murderer may be.
- Reveal the identity of the murderer and explain their reasons for this decision. The students whose character is named as the murderer get a chance to defend themselves.
- Watch the last scene of the movie as a class.

Jane Austen's novel *Emma*, written in the 19th century, tells the story of Emma Woodhouse, the younger daughter of a wealthy Englishman. She likes matchmaking, but sometimes things do not go the way she intends them to. When her friend Mr. Knightley tries to prevent her from interfering with other people's lives, they fall in love, resulting in numerous complications.

Activity 3: Writing a Comparison and Contrast Essay

Students read the novel chapter by chapter and watch both an early British-made version of the movie and a contemporary American-made version. Over several class periods, they work through the various stages of the writing process to develop a comparison-contrast essay focusing on the differences and similarities between either the movie and the novel or the two versions of the movie from any angle that they choose.

Activity 4: Attending to Language

This activity helps learners pay close attention to syntactic, semantic, and lexical forms used in a particular situation and to realize that there are multiple ways of expressing similar thoughts.

1. Download the transcript of the final scene from one version of the movie and prepare two forms—one with deletions in Emma's side of the conversation and the other with deletions in Mr. Knightley's side. An example is shown in Appendix C.
2. Divide the class into two; assign the role of Emma to one half and Mr. Knightley to the other half and give them the appropriate version of the transcript.
3. Watch the scene. Students try to fill in the deletions in the lines of their character.
4. Students work in Emma-Emma and Knightley-Knightley pairs to compare notes.
5. Students then work in Emma-Knightley pairs to cross-check and read aloud the transcriptions, trying out the words that they have heard.
6. Students watch the final scene in the second movie version, note the differences in language, and have a follow-up discussion.

Activity 5: Writing a (Portion of) a Screen Play

After completing the book and watching the movie, students work in Emma-Knightley pairs to rewrite a scene bringing the vocabulary, tone, voice, or even the plot to give it a new twist or bring it up to date. They act out their dialogues in front of the class.

The *Accidental Tourist* is based on a contemporary novel by Anne Tyler and tells the story of travel guide writer, Macon Leary, who suffers numerous personal tragedies. The movie touches on themes including, but not limited to marriage, divorce, love, family, and individuality.

Activity 6: Writing a Travel Brochure:

The protagonist in this tale is a travel writer. With this activity, students try their hand at his occupation, writing a travel brochure or article. As warm-up, the students brainstorm about traveling by answering the following questions in pairs or in small groups:

- What are two essential things you always take with you when you travel?
- What are two unnecessary things you always take with you when you travel?
- What countries or other regions have you traveled to or would like to travel to?
- What kind of traveler are you? Back-packer? Resort hotel type?
- How do you get information about your destinations before you travel? Do you consult travel guides, the Internet, or just wait and see what the place has to reveal?

Then, they discuss what kind of travel guide they would like to write. Working in small groups over several class periods, they choose a real or imaginary destination, plan the content, collect needed information, and then produce their brochure

Afterword

Undergraduate programs in English Language Teaching (ELT) often include literature courses in which the students read short stories, poems, and novels mainly written by famous British and American writers from a wide range of genres and literary currents. They analyze these literary texts, focusing on the sociocultural and historical context of the period in which these pieces were written. They discuss the meaning of literary devices such as characterization, dialogue, setting, imagery, and theme. The focus in these literature courses, however, is usually on textual analysis rather than on presenting teacher candidates with ways in which they can utilize literature in their future language classes. Teacher candidates may conclude that literature is merely a mandatory content class that they need to take in order to fulfill their degree requirements rather than a source of authentic language use and cultural information about the target language that they will be teaching upon graduation. Therefore, pre-service programs with a strong literature component might consider addressing practical techniques, such as those presented above, for using literature in their future English classes. Doing so could equip them with strategies for adding appeal, variety, and content to their language lessons.

About the Author

Betil Eröz received her Ph.D. in second language acquisition and teaching from the University of Arizona. She is currently an assistant professor at the Department of Foreign Language Education in Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. Her teaching and research interests include qualitative classroom studies, language teacher training, and teaching methodology.

Appendix A

Suggested Titles of Novels with Movies

These works of British or American literature all have more than one acceptable movie versions. However, individual teachers may find some of the novels to be dated or difficult, so it is important to preview the movies, read the books, and consider the linguistic, sociocultural, and general background knowledge of the students before selecting a particular work for study.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <i>An Ideal Husband</i> , Oscar Wilde | <i>Sense and Sensibility</i> , Jane Austen |
| <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> ,
William Shakespeare | <i>The Great Gatsby</i> , F. Scott Fitzgerald |
| <i>A Passage to India</i> , E. M. Forster | <i>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</i> ,
Victor Hugo |
| <i>Death on the Nile</i> , Agatha Christie | <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> ,
Oscar Wilde |
| <i>Great Expectations</i> , Charles Dickens | <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , J. R. R. Tolkien |
| <i>Harry Potter</i> , J. K. Rowling | <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> , Oscar Wilde |
| <i>Little Women</i> , Louisa May Alcott | <i>The Scarlet Letter</i> , Nathaniel Hawthorne |
| <i>Lord of the Flies</i> , William Golding | <i>The Wizard of Oz</i> , L. Frank Baum |
| <i>Oliver Twist</i> , Charles Dickens. | <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , Harper Lee. |
| <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> , Jane Austen | <i>Wuthering Heights</i> , Emily Bronte |

Appendix B

Example Notes for Suspects in the Orient Express

The Suspects	Their Statements
Mrs. Harriet Hubbard Mrs. Armstrong's mother	A strange man hiding in room after 1:00 at night; cried out
Door in room opening into Mr. Rachett's compartment	Found a strange button on her magazine Found the bloody murder weapon in make-up bag
Greta Ohisson Armstrongs' Swedish nurse	Didn't leave room until morning Have white nightgown with red dragons on the back Light sleeper
Princess Dragomiroff Russian princess Mrs. Armstrong's god mother Friend of Mrs. Armstrong's mother who was an actress	In bed at the time of murder Some drink and medicine

Appendix C

Transcripts of the Last Scene of *Emma*

 Transcript for Students Reading Knightley's Role

- Knightley: You don't wish to know what that is? You are _____, I see, to have no _____. Emma, I must tell you _____, though _____ the next moment
- Emma: Oh! Then don't speak it. *Take a little time*, do not *commit* yourself. I stopped you so *ungraciously*, just then. Yes, I will hear you, If you wish to tell me you are contemplating something. Yes, *you may speak* to me as a friend.
- Knightley: As a friend! Emma, that I fear . . . No, I have gone too far for _____. Tell me, then, I have no chance _____? My dearest Emma, for dearest you will always be, _____. Say "No" if it is to be said. I can't _____ Emma. If I _____ you less, I _____ talk about it more. But you know _____ you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England _____ it. Well, _____ the truth I tell you now. _____ may not have much to _____ them, but you understand me. Yes, you understand my feelings and _____.
- Emma: I can. I do return them. I do love you. *I believe I always have*, though I *didn't know* it until yesterday, I think.
- Knightley: Then, will you _____?
- Emma: I do. I do. *This is so strange*.
- Knightley: I _____ when you were three weeks old.
- Emma: Do you like me *as well now as you did then*?

 Transcript for Students Reading Emma's Role

- Knightley: You don't wish to know what that is? You are determined, I see, to have no curiosity. Emma, I must tell you what you will not ask, though I may wish it unsaid the next moment.

Emma: Oh! Then don't speak it. _____, do not _____ yourself. I stopped you so _____, just then. Yes, I _____ you if you _____ to tell me you are _____ something. Yes, _____ as a friend.

Knightley: As a friend! Emma, that I fear . . . No, I have gone too far concealment. Tell me, then, have I no chance for ever succeeding? My dearest Emma, for dearest you will always be, tell me at once. Say "no" if it is to be said. I can't make speeches Emma. If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am. You hear nothing but truth from me. I have blamed you. I have lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it. Well, bear with the truth I tell you now. My manners may not have much to recommend them, but you understand me. Yes, you understand my feelings and will return them if you can.

Emma: I can. I do return them. I do love you. _____, though I _____ it until yesterday, I think.

Knightley: Then, will you consent?

Emma: I do. I do _____.

Knightley: I held you in my arms when you were three weeks old.

Emma: Do you like me _____?