

Integrating Short Video Films in Teaching English to the Undergraduates Pursuing a Degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies

S. Rifa Mahroof

Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language
South Eastern University of Sri Lanka Oluvil, Sri Lanka
rifahome@yahoo.com

Abstract

Video films have dynamically extended their use as invaluable resources in language learning classrooms. However, the impact of its benefit is yet to be seen in teacher centred classrooms where English language teaching is still limited to conventional methods. This study investigates short video film as a pedagogical tool for teaching conversational skills at the faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language. It adopts an intervention approach within the qualitative paradigm. The finding reveals that the learners were motivated in perceiving the affordance to practise conversational skills in meaningful interaction. The study concludes that the effectiveness of short video films as an audio visual pedagogical aid can be achieved only when it is used appropriately, which requires careful planning in the choice of film based on its relevance to suit the proficiency level of learners and administration of meaningful tasks during the pre-viewing, while viewing and post- viewing stage.

Key words: Video films, English language teaching, conversational skills, audio visual aid

Introduction

Video films have dynamically extended their use as invaluable resources in language learning classrooms. However, the impact of its benefit is yet to be seen in teacher centred classrooms where English language teaching (ELT) is still limited to conventional methods that restricts the opportunities for learning or “affordances” (Van Lier, 2000) available for language use. Teacher centred classroom based learning is found inefficient in sustaining the interest of learners towards learning conversational skills of the target language. In the context of teaching English to the undergraduates of the faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language (FIA), there is a need to provide them the context to practice their conversational skills. Through the experience of the researcher, it has been found that learners lack confidence and have low self-esteem about their use of English in classrooms because they are conscious of making mistakes. One of the most challenging tasks for lecturers is to provide opportunity for learners to use English in a context where communicative exchange is possible. This clearly shows that there is a need to identify efficient stimulating strategies that will motivate learners to use language.

Video watching, as a teaching aid adds audio visual element to instructions and reaches those, whose learning style is not facilitated through conventional classroom teaching (Tognozzi 2010). This approach appeals as it brings a wealth of instructional resources into the classroom, which is evident in both written and oral form to be perceived by the learners while being fully involved in learning activities.

In view of providing meaningful and authentic language use, this study aims to investigate short video films as a pedagogical tool for teaching conversational skills at FIA.

The research questions addressed in the study are:

- I. What are the pedagogical implications of integrating short video films into the teaching and learning of English conversational skills for FIA undergraduates?
- II. How can learning through short video films motivate learners to use English?

Literature Review

Short video films with subtitles is an audio visual pedagogical tool that has been found to motivate learners in learning all four language skills. (Jalal et al. 2014; Baratta & Jones, 2008). Khan (2015) believes that the “visuality” of films can facilitate comprehension and understanding for the language learners in an ideal visual context, which makes it an effective language-teaching tool. She further argues that films offer a variety of methods and resources for teaching the target language, helping students to improve their listening and communicative skills. Films, as a method of teaching have also been found to be an effective motivator for studying language (Seferoğlu, 2008; Ismaili, 2013). Although films with subtitles slow down listening skills, they have the potential in helping the learning process by providing learners with authentic and comprehensible language input (Jalal et al. 2014).

Tognozzi, (2010) claims that video watching can direct the attention of learners towards the target language as there is a need to be immersed in the visual effect. This claim is supported by Ruusunen, (2011) who states that it can increase the learners’ motivation to learn the language. With regard to affordances, videos provide authentic language use pushing the learners to use language during classroom discussion (Seferoğlu, 2008). While watching films, they create awareness of the culture of the characters using the target language, stimulating them to use the language. The background information of the film activates prior knowledge, which is essential in stimulating the learners to improve communication skills (Khan, 2015; Baratta & Jones, 2008). It has been cautioned by scholars that films should be chosen with educational objectives in mind. The theme and content should be such that they should not prove to be purely entertainment for the students but be rather rich in content while being motivating for the students to watch (Stoller, 1988).

Research has indicated the impact of films on the development of language skills. It helps in developing writing skills by providing interesting and motivating clues, assisting in comprehension and production of language (Hanley & Herron, 1995). By reading sub titles, learners can improve their reading skills (Mirvan, 2013). They not only provide a context to learn language skills, but it has been found that it stimulates the imagination of the students (Kusumarasyati, 2004). In a video film, the daily conversational exchanges with appropriate accent and vocabulary as well as the use of paralinguistic features like gestures, pauses, actions, and reactions help learners to understand the gist of the dialogues (Keene 2006). Through authentic language input, video films provide contextual information and develop interactional skills compared to videos made specifically for language learners (Swaffar & Vlatten 1997). As an effective pedagogical tool, video films not only provide the content for learning listening and speaking skills but assist in readily delivering the oral lesson authentically and offering a variety of methods and resources for teaching the target language (Khan 2015).

Although short films have proved to be an excellent pedagogical tool, Stoller (1988) asserts that it becomes a powerful resource only if it is appropriately employed by the teacher as it is neither a substitute for the teacher nor one for instruction but can be used as a support to promote active learning. He further states that it is very challenging as it requires film previewing and careful lesson planning with clearly defined learning outcomes and activities. This creates the need to choose appropriate films that matches the proficiency level of the target learners. King (2002) reiterates this view and further adds that the content should not prove to be offensive to the students. Several studies also show that films help in increasing the confidence of the students in speaking as they learn how to use certain words and to pronounce correctly (Seferoğlu, 2008; Florence, 2009).

Keene (2006) states that “technology is mainly used in the learners’ home for entertainment, escapism and relaxation, all of which encourage a passive form of viewing” (p. 223). Hence, it is the responsibility of teachers to be committed and plan lessons in ways that promote active interactive learning. The author observes that giving an introduction to the film and characters also help sustain interest in the film. This also helps learners to understand and contextualize the language that is spoken in the film. Reiterating Stoller’s (1988) view, Li (2012) emphasizes the need of a short introduction during previewing the film followed by a discussion what the film would contain, new vocabulary and expressions which the teacher feels would be very effective in the comprehension of the film. A review of several studies reveal that, although films are a very powerful tool in second language acquisition, they can only achieve their full pedagogical potentials with the use of effective strategies and tasks. The activities used to exploit the films depend on what the teacher wishes to convey to his students. The same clip can convey different messages depending on the strategies and activities used (Keene, 2006).

The combination of audio and visual characteristics of films allow teachers to apply different viewing techniques to assist their teaching. Stempleski and Tomalin (2001) have identified different types of viewing techniques, which can be used at different stages of the English learning lesson.

1. Normal viewing : Vision on/sound on
2. Silent viewing: Vision on/sound off
3. Sound only viewing: Vision of/sound on
4. Still-viewing: Pause/still/free-frame control

In employing subtitles, there are different ways the teacher can advocate depending on the purpose of viewing the film. Soundtracks and subtitles can be generated in a variety of language such as the target language (L2) and the learner's mother tongue (L1) depending on the purposes of use. Sherman (2003) suggests the following techniques to help teachers to use at different stages of the lesson depending on the purposes:

1. L1 soundtrack: Compare understanding with original L2 version
2. L1 soundtrack + L2 subtitles: Vocabulary extension
3. L2 Soundtrack + L1 subtitles: Check comprehension, translation exercises
4. L2 soundtrack + L2 subtitles: Transcribing script, improve comprehension, reading

Methodology

The study adopted an intervention approach within the qualitative paradigm, followed by a semi-structured interview and administration of a feedback questionnaire to get perception of the participants. The subjects of the study were 36 undergraduates of SEUSL, who had their primary and secondary education in Sammanthurai. As the purpose of the study is to explore the possibility of integrating video films in ELT, convenience sampling was employed.

The short Youtube video English film “ The Hive” by Adam Ciolfi was selected for its short, simplified utterances. Based on the instructional objectives, this film was found appropriate for the target group who are in the pre intermediate group. This 10 minute duration film was selected as it is short enough to be viewed within the classroom time. To ease comprehension, the English subtitles were auto generated for viewing. The integration of films in the classrooms was conducted following the steps suggested by Stoller (1988)

Before the learners viewed the film, previewing activities like discussion of the title and brain storming activities were done with some pictures on screen and questions to activate their background knowledge. Students were also provided with some key vocabulary and potentially difficult expressions to facilitate their understanding of the storyline. The students watched the film with the subtitle in a classroom which had a computer and a projector. Students were provided with worksheets that drew their attention

to particular utterances in the film and required them to complete the dialogue. This while viewing activity helped them to focus on the characters and their conversational exchanges. The second time, they were allowed to watch without the subtitles. As the intended learning outcome was for learners to be able to use the language spoken by the characters, subtitles were removed to focus their concentration on what was being said. After viewing the film they were asked to get into groups of six and a laptop with the video was given to each group and they were assigned to plan a role play in pairs with five exchanges each. They also had to note down all the newly heard vocabulary. After preparation and practice, volunteer learners role played in pairs. As a follow up activity, they were provided a set of guidelines, in the form of questions to help them write a summary of the film. After chances for roleplaying was given to all groups, a feedback questionnaire was administered to get their perceptions. Ten participants were randomly selected and they were interviewed in their L1, Tamil, which was later translated to quote during discussion.

FINDING

Table 1: Questionnaire to get the perception of learners in the effectiveness of using short video films in learning oral skills

No		Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
		No.	%	No.	%	No	%	No	%
1	Learning English through video watching was interesting					6	17	30	83
2	I was able to see how characters spoke in real situations					9	25	27	75
3	It gave me opportunity to hear how the characters spoke			5	14	11	30	20	56
4	I was able to follow the dialogues by reading subtitles.	2	6	15	42	12	33	7	19

5	I was able to follow the story line from subtitles	7	19	13	36	10	28	6	17
6	I was able to follow the story line from the dialogues	2	5	9	25	15	42	10	28
7	I was able to follow the story line from the background setting					8	22	28	78
8	The characters in the film spoke very fast	5	14	13	36	12	33	6	17
9	The dialogues were long and complex	20	56	13	36	2	5	1	3
10	The pre-viewing activities helped me to follow the story line			4	11	21	58	11	31
11	The while-viewing activities helped me to focus on what the characters were saying	4	11	6	17	20	55	6	17
12	I like to learn oral skills through film viewing			1	3	20	55	15	42
13	The post viewing role play activity helped to practice some of the utterances spoken by the characters					17	47	19	53

In expressing the learners' opinion on film viewing to learn English oral skills, some comments from the interview are highlighted below:

“Learning was fun, learnt how to use English naturally in conversation”

“I really like the way the teacher taught us we were able to practise the way the characters in the film spoke and this gave us the confidence that we were speaking correctly the discussion we had the role play helped to use English”

“The discussion we had at the beginning.... the background music.....visual prompts were very helpful to understand the conversation between the mother and guardian.”

“I couldn’t understand much of what they said.... no time to read subtitles, but I understood very short utterances.... and understood the film”

“Though, they spoke very fast, reading the subtitle helped me to understand what they were saying”

“I learnt to say “it’s okay” and “Are you alright” in the way I heard.... helped to practice oral skills”

DISCUSSION

An analysis of the feedback questionnaire reveals that the learners on a general level show interest in integrating short video films in learning conversational skills. This is reflected by unanimous agreement of which 83% strongly agreeing on “Learning English through video watching was interesting”. Learners’ motivation to learn English through video watching is revealed by 97% agreeing that they like to learn oral skills through film viewing. This consolidates Ruusunen’s (2011) view that learning through film viewing increases learners’ motivation to learn the language. The ability to be exposed to language use and meaningful interaction is displayed by almost all agreeing that they were able to see and hear how characters spoke in real situations, which in turn helped them to comprehend the story with ease. However, only approximately half the learners have been able to follow the dialogue by reading sub titles. This is indicated by only 52% agreeing that they were able to follow the dialogue by reading subtitles. In comprehending the storyline, there is a significant difference as only 45% have been able to comprehend the story line from subtitles and 70% from dialogues. This finding is in variance with response displayed in comprehending the story from background information which shows unanimous agreement with 78% strong agreement on ‘I was able to follow the story line from the background setting’. This is consistent with Khan’ (2015) and Baratta and Jones’ (2008) finding that the audio visual effect derived from video enables learners to contextualize the learning context. The interactive nature of viewing the film is facilitated by the while viewing activities, which is reflected by 72% agreeing that “the while-viewing activities helped me to focus on what the characters were saying”. While over three fourth the respondents are seen to have benefitted from the pre- viewing activities, reflected by 89% agreeing that the pre-viewing activities helped them to follow the story line, it is also notable that the fast pace of the dialogue has not favoured the students, which is indicated by

50% agreeing that “the characters in the film spoke very fast”. This finding is consistent with the finding from the interview. The right choice of the film to match the level of the learners’ English proficiency is revealed by 92% strongly disagreeing that ‘the dialogues were long and complex’.

The finding from the interview reveals that short video films are invaluable pedagogical tools to actively engage learners in learning oral skills. This supports the assertion by Khan (2015) that the audio visual effect provided by the film helps to stimulate more meaningful interaction in the classroom. The students learn how people interact in real situations and watching the lively characters, their emotions are aroused and motivated to use language with accepted pronunciation. It is also notable that the diversity in style of teaching and learning can significantly foster and promote active learning. A notable finding from the questionnaire response show that the post viewing activities provided affordance to practise language, which is demonstrated by all respondents agreeing with 53% strongly agreeing that “the post viewing role play activity helped to practice some of the utterances spoken by the characters.”

A closer look at the analysis of the feedback questionnaire combined with the finding from the semi structured interviews show that the learners are motivated and interested in learning English, when there is an audio visual to support learning. The finding shows the usefulness of this audio visual aid in promoting conversational skills. The interview with students also reveals that the relaxed environment helped them to reduce their anxiety and fear of speaking, when immersed in learning activities of this nature. Learning through short films is an effective way to sustain and motivate learners to develop their interactional skills. This finding is consistent with Ruusunen’s (2011) claim that watching video films is an effective motivational strategy to provide greater opportunities for meaningful and authentic language use than are available in the classroom. The participants in the study revealed that they were exposed to the real English used by the characters which gave them the confidence in attempting to use English.

As the main objective was to make them use English, the authentic and meaningful context pushed them to speak a few utterances as they were motivated to use English. This agrees with Seferoğlu’s claim (2008) that the real language used in the film pushes the learners to use language during classroom discussion, thus increasing the confidence of the learners to use certain utterances as they hear them. This conducive learning environment establishes a platform for effective ELT instruction. While the film provides rich resources by delivering the oral content authentically, the pre-viewing, while-viewing and post viewing activities as stated by Stoller (1988) helped to keep the learners actively engaged in meaningful classroom discussion and stir their imagination when they planned their role play.

The findings of the study indicate that films are valuable teaching materials for improving students’ speaking. The participants found themselves more interactive and engaged in the lessons. The participants also reported that films are beneficial for enhancing their interactional skills and developing

confidence. This agrees with Katchen's claim (2003) that the printed material usually do not teach for instance small talk and conversational interaction; thus, films can be an effective way to motivate learners to develop their interactional skills. Since films usually present real language spoken naturally with different interactional situations, it helps them to develop more confidence to speak in English. A meaningful context is believed to provide a platform to use English. The affordance provided to use English through film viewing kept the learners actively engaged in the learning activities.

The participants also expressed that the learning context helped to be exposed to new vocabulary. This finding conforms Keene's (2006) view that the integration of films in the language classroom could significantly enhance and improve the students' vocabulary acquisition, retention, and recognition. Although the study reveals that short video film is a powerful pedagogical tool, as cautioned by Stoller (1988), the effectiveness of it depends on how pedagogically appropriate the selected film is and how effectively it is integrated in teaching. The subtitles were really useful to compensate the quick flow of the dialogue and ease comprehension so that they knew what exactly the characters were saying. However, there were poor readers who were totally dependent on the visual effect of the film to understand the story.

Though it was challenging to select a film to achieve the set objective of the study, pre viewing and preparation of activities based on the film helped the researcher to provide an effective learning environment. In the perspective of a teacher, the researcher found the learners enjoying the lesson, being more interactive and engaged in their group discussion. In considering the usefulness, the general view shows that the respondents are more motivated and interested in learning English, when there is an audio visual to support learning. The relaxed environment helped them be immersed in their learning activities.

This intervention can be reiterated. Based on the experience gathered during the intervention, the researcher proposes a set of guidelines that can be taken into consideration, when administering short films as a strategy to practise English conversational skills.

1. Choose an interesting short English film that has the option of generating subtitles in the target language.
2. Ensure the film is a short one to enable learners to view and complete the activities within the lecture duration time.
3. Make sure it matches the English proficiency level of learners
4. Advise learners to bring their dictionary so that unknown/ difficult words can be referred during the lesson.
5. When teacher encounters new phrases, the learners can be made to repeat for reinforcement and enjoyment, so that they can be internalized to be used in future

6. Allow learners to view the film, the second time without subtitles during when their focus is directed to listening while viewing. This will take off the time and effort invested on reading subtitles, which in turn can help them to recollect the dialogues and check how much they can understand without subtitles.
7. Open the floor for discussion and practice

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of short video films as an audio visual pedagogical aid can be achieved only when it is used appropriately. This requires careful planning and selection of the appropriate film that matches the purpose, interest and the proficiency level of learners along with the administration of meaningful tasks during the pre-viewing, while viewing and post viewing stage. The audio visual effect provides affordances for language practice and therefore contributes significantly to the development of language skills particularly listening and speaking skills. The full pedagogical potential can be achieved with the use of effective strategies based on set objectives and learning outcome. The same film can be used to teach other language skills in different ways depending on the purpose with different strategies and activities.

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