

REPLANNING A CONTENT-BASED LANGUAGE COURSE ON AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH MOVIES

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This paper presents a case study on the replanning of a content-based language course on American culture through movies that the researcher taught at Poole Gakuin Junior College in 1992-93. The course was originally designed as a lecture and film-oriented class supported by reading material, report writing, and limited speaking exercises to aid comprehension. A previous paper by the author (1993) outlines the various phases of the initial planning process: considering constraints of the class and materials; determining content and language instruction objectives; selecting films for viewing in class; preparing reading materials; providing learning strategies to help student comprehension; and developing instruments for student evaluation. It concluded with some tentative suggestions for replanning. The present study extends these ideas, and details specific measures that the researcher would change or incorporate into the design if the course were taught again.

First-time planning began four months before the class started, and focused mainly on content. Considerable time was spent on the author's re-education on the content matter, research of subjects and issues for the lectures, and review and selection of the movies and reading material. By the time the class started, the details of applying various language learning strategies were still being worked through. According to Snow (1991), advanced planning really is a necessity so that the teacher can more clearly define both the content and language sides of the course. This is because the roles of the content teacher are expanded when compared to traditional English as a Second Language teaching methods. The content teacher has to identify language structures and skills that pair as naturally as possible with the content material. It also means that the teacher has to become familiar enough with the content material to put it to meaningful use. All of this implies the need for systematic planning of instruction far in advance through a variety of strategies and techniques.

There are aspects of the original course the author would like to have changed, but had little or no control over. The class met once a week for 90 minutes over a span of 28 weeks. Two meetings a week would have been preferable, allowing more content coverage in depth as well as more immediate continuity in presenting the films and their subject matter. Secondly, the class consisted of 45 students of mixed proficiency levels. The researcher found these conditions to be adequate for a lecture-oriented course, but less satisfactory when trying to initiate limited speaking tasks. From this experience, a reduced class size at a single proficiency level would appear more ideal. Regardless of how the students were streamed, a course could be designed by level according to a continuum based on the following general parameters:

1. For elementary/lower intermediate levels, the course would focus more on language learning purposes using very short video segments; it would include highly structured language learning tasks for reading, speaking, and listening (relatively simple exercises for pairs or groups aimed at understanding the story and elements of the dialog).

2. For upper intermediate/advanced levels, the course would focus more on content purposes using longer video segments; language learning tasks would be less structured with more emphasis on techniques for guiding group and class discussions.

The author originally thought about assigning most of the movie viewing for outside homework; however, it was ultimately decided to use considerable class time for this purpose due to the uncertainty of the films' availability to all students outside of class. A second attempt would try to gradually re-orient the course toward more outside movie viewing by encouraging the school to develop a film library with an adequate supply of video equipment. If self-study were offered, the students could direct their attention to listening and reading closed-caption English in the library film to get at the finer points of understanding the language in the dialog; whereas, class viewing time could focus more on understanding the content.

Re-evaluation of the course objectives is always a necessary step in replanning. In setting the content objectives, the author tried to cover a wide range of general themes on the United States: historical forces that have shaped the present; contemporary social issues; everyday life, institutions, values, and traditions; and the development of the American film industry. The intent was to provide a comprehensive picture of American society, but the result tended to be fragmented. Given the time constraints of the course, it would have been preferable to reduce the scope of the course and to study one of these general theme areas in depth rather than sample from the four in a piecemeal fashion. On the language instruction side, the author would expand the objectives to aim at greater improvement of speaking skills. The Poole Gakuin course was film viewing and lecture-oriented, which meant that it was often too passive in nature. Video viewing in long segments tends to reinforce this passivity. According to Allan (1985) and Lonergan (1984), the aim should be to get the students more involved by assigning them speaking, viewing, and other active tasks that give them a concrete reason to watch the film.

Determined by the constraints of what could be accomplished over a span of 28 class periods, it was initially decided that showing eight to ten films would be possible. The researcher developed several criteria to facilitate the movie selection process, mainly directed at content:

1. Does the film show two or more aspects of American culture in conformity with course objectives?
2. Was the film generally well-received by critics in terms of accurately depicting the subject matter?
3. Is the film instructive about American culture yet entertaining as well?

4. What language format is used in the film: English only, dubbed Japanese, English with Japanese subtitles, or closed-caption English?

5. How long is the movie?

After the Poole Gakuin course, the researcher reconsidered the film selection process. To redirect the course more toward the language learning side, and also reflect the reduced scope of the content objectives, the number of films could be decreased to four shown in their entirety. The other alternative is to choose many films in edited form in which each focuses on the content issues, and eliminates the rest of the film as extraneous material. The advantage to showing excerpts is more films and subject areas could be sampled. However, much explanation would be necessary to put the excerpted segments into context. The author reasons that if this is to be a movie class, then the first alternative of showing fewer movies would seem to be the best choice because the continuity of the story line is maintained, and regardless of whether parts of the film were irrelevant to its main themes, it would appear that more interest and motivation could be generated. An obvious example is the students being drawn to what will happen in the next segment of the film. Editing a film could be justified, however, if it were too long such as in the case of movies like Dances With Wolves or JFK.

Showing four films over the year may also be preferable to such approaches as the Sony CINEX movie course which uses one or two. In the CINEX case, the dialog is dissected into very short segments with the aim of understanding all the film information in detail through a wide range of video language learning techniques. In the other approach of showing four films, such techniques could be concentrated mainly in the areas of the film relevant to the content in longer segments, with the non-essential parts of the film shown but not studied in any great detail.

With fewer films, it is advisable to choose movies that address as many content issues as possible. For example, a syllabus for To Kill a Mockingbird could include such topics as race relations and discrimination, the justice system, life in a small town, the impact of economic depression on poor farmers, family relations in a single parent household, childhood memories, and attitudes toward mental illness. The point here is to maximize the presentation of the content material with less film viewing, while re-allocating more class time to speaking and other language learning activities.

The author would also reinforce the content subjects shown in each movie with the introduction of a Japanese subtitled or English closed-captioned news item that contextualized the film material in a concise way. For this purpose, the teacher could assemble short documentaries from foreign television sources in English caption, or news segments available in Japan partially subtitled in Japanese from such sources as Prime Time, 20-20, and Inside Edition on satellite television. This material should be shown after the movie with the rationale being to use the film to capture student interest through its entertainment value and then draw them gradually into the content area desired. For example, after viewing To Kill a Mockingbird or the courtroom sequence

from this film, a news segment on the Rodney King Case that spawned the Los Angeles riot in 1992 could be shown.

Criteria for selecting movies would be generally the same; however, more thought should have been directed at the issue of using Japanese subtitled films or English closed-caption films. Vanderplank (1988, 1993) has found in his research that learners can benefit from English captions in terms of listening comprehension/comprehensible input, vocabulary acquisition, and reading skills. English captions tend to work best for upper intermediate to advanced learners. Why this format works at all may be surprising in spite of the apparent overwhelming of the senses with additional information. He suggests the reasons for the benefits are that closed captions allow increased redundancy in listening to and reading English, and provide a synopsis of the dynamic speech which might otherwise be lost in the processing of the material. From the author's limited experience with lower level students than Vanderplank's, it should be added that English captions appear to work better in short and repetitive language learning tasks.

Japanese subtitles seem to be better at getting at understanding the content matter and story line right away, and are more capable of allowing the film to be shown over longer segments. According to Allan (p. 96), the use of subtitles is a good way of providing learners with extended exposure to the target language while helping them keep pace with the plot. It is usually possible to read subtitles in less time than it takes the characters to complete the exchange. So the viewer can find out what will be said and then listen to how it is said. Thus, for the purposes of a course as the author would re-define it, Japanese subtitles would probably work best. Since it is assumed that the course would still emphasize content, language learning strategies should be structured around understanding the story and its subject matter through the use of subtitles rather than the complete dialog.

Another issue not considered the first time involves the choice of films based on historical events or presented from the point of view of a particular group in society. A movie like JFK may look something like a documentary to students not familiar with the Kennedy assassination, and it could be difficult for them to separate fact from speculation. Such a film could be used, but it would be necessary for the teacher to explain, or show other movie clips based on history where the facts have been altered to suit the story. Another example is Dances With Wolves which is told from a Native American perspective. This film contains many fine elements, but virtually every white person is portrayed as either aggressive or indifferent to the plight of the Native American. Such a film needs to be placed into perspective with the many Hollywood films before it that portrayed these people as savages, thieves, and impediments to the white settlement of the West.

In evaluating movie selections in the replanning process, the author found a useful exercise to employ was to have the students assess all the films in a year-end

survey. The students were directed to rate each film in terms of quality on a scale of five to one (excellent to poor), and then rank the movies in order from highest to lowest preference. After the rating, the students wrote their impressions in more detail about what film aspects they liked and disliked. An alternative method would be to have the students write a film review at the conclusion of each movie when the content is still fresh in their minds. This would include comments on length, portrayal of the subject matter, elements of the film they liked and disliked, and recommendations to the film-goer and their reasons.

The next planning phase was selecting reading material for support of the lectures and film viewing. No single textbook was found adequate to the needs of the course, so handout material from a wide range of sources was prepared. These included: synopses of all the films to assist student comprehension of the story lines; selected script segments from the films to highlight certain language usage and subject issues in the lectures; biographical material on the director and main actors/actresses of each film; background material on features of American culture covered in the lectures and films; and general outlines of the lectures containing their main points. Periodic multiple choice quizzes were given to ensure that the students read the material.

In replanning the course, more attention would be directed to improving the learners' reading comprehension by providing exercises to help them with vocabulary and content. As suggested by Mejia, Xiao, and Pasternak (1992), vocabulary in context and reading exercises consistent with student proficiency levels would be incorporated. Elementary and lower intermediate students would be given true/false or multiple choice exercises; whereas, upper intermediate and advanced learners would be given comprehension questions. The author would also consider adding readings on reviews of the films, one favorable and one unfavorable.

In the Poole Gakuin course, the conduct of a typical class was dominated by lectures and film viewing. Adjustments were made during the year, but the time allocation settled into the following pattern: 30-40 minutes for introduction and follow-up lectures; 30-45 minutes to show the film segment without pause; and 15-30 minutes for questions, comparisons of lecture outline notes, and occasional group discussions. Most time was spent on review of the lecture outlines, and appeared to be effective in improving the learners' comprehension of the lecture and films. Attempts to generate group discussion were much less successful due to the mixed proficiency levels of the class. Most students found it difficult to formulate opinions, and even with grammar and vocabulary aids, the structured questions were often too difficult to answer or expand on.

In replanning the conduct of a typical class, the author would shorten the lecture time to about 15-20 minutes, and expand the time for active film viewing exercises. In this scenario, the film viewing for the day would be divided into shorter segments of 5-10 minutes each based on the length of a particular scene or groups of scenes that were logically related and formed a convenient termination. Prior to each segment, speaking

exercise material would be handed out to the students to make the viewing more active. The exercises would be structured, and designed to help the students follow the story and comprehend the content material more effectively.

For this purpose, narrative recall and reported speech exercises would probably be most useful, but the author would limit the latter since the aim is not to dissect the speech. The narrative recall of actions, events, and descriptions would help the students understand what had happened in the story up to the pause. Stempleski and Tomlin (1990) have suggested some active video viewing techniques that might be appropriate in this case. These include: providing true/false statements or multiple choice questions about the segment; asking the learners what they saw on the screen that relates to the story; giving the learners a synopsis of the segment with clozed blanks in it; giving the learners 10 words or phrases that give a clue to the segment and talking about them; giving the students 10 sentences that summarize the events in the segment in random order and having them reconstruct the story line; having the students talk about verbal and visual clues in the segment that describe the story's characters and setting; and providing narrative comprehension questions that add up to a summary of the segment.

For classes in which the students were linguistically capable, the author would follow-up the total segment with more open-ended discussion with structured questions. These would include speculative and comparative questions. In the former case, the students speculate on what will happen in the next film segment or if the situation were changed. In the latter case, the learners focus on comparisons that they can make with Japan. After the student discussion, each group or pair would prepare a question or comment about the segment to the teacher.

In conclusion, using movies to teach about culture can be a workable approach in many possible formats. In replanning, flexibility should be maintained with a willingness to change the syllabus, materials, films, and/or learning strategies from year to year. In the case of a culture course like the one at Poole Gakuin, the author would try to redirect it from one that was lecture and film-oriented to one that involved the students through more active film viewing. On the content side, movies should be selected that relate to real life. In this context, the content can be used to teach language which may be preferable to using the speech in the films to teach language.

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