Learn, Think, Act: Using Movies to Develop Critical Thinking Skills

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Abstract
This article deals with the use of movies as instructional tools for EFL students and explores various interpretations of critical thinking. It investigates whether and how movies enhance students’ learning environment and their critical thinking skills. The paper elaborates four approaches to movie selection and a three step model for presentation in the classroom, and illustrates how movies can be employed to develop critical thinking skills.

What is Critical Thinking?

Scriven and Paul (1987) note that, “critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness.” A complementary view is that critical thinking is self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way (Elder, 2011). People who think critically consistently attempt to live rationally, reasonably and empathically.
It is the ability to analyze and evaluate information and includes attitude, value and character - or the whole being. Critical thinking is an art of life- to live one’s life with head and heart. It is a skill all can develop to improve one’s self and others. As known, angry people are seldom reasonable; reasonable people are seldom angry.

Bloom (1956 Quoted in Krathwohl, 2002) taxonomy denotes six levels within the cognitive domain - knowledge of recalled information, comprehension or understanding learned information, application, of information in situations, analysis into parts and understanding their functionality within the whole, synthesis of parts to form a new and original whole and evaluation or making judgments based upon information.

The hierarchy of Bloom’s taxonomy was revised by Anderson (1992) with some components being renamed and the last two levels repositioned. This new version better enables teacher assessment, teacher self-assessment and student assessment.

The Paul-Elder framework proposes three components of critical thinking:

1. The elements of thought (reasoning)
2. The intellectual standards that should be applied to the elements of reasoning.
3. The intellectual traits associated with a cultivated critical thinker that result from the consistent and disciplined application of intellectual standards to the elements of thought.

Movies as an Instructional Tool

As well as providing visual and auditory stimuli, movies as a popular culture, are appropriate for 21st century EFL students whose language competence is less than proficient. Attitude is regarded as the primary gateway to learning, as it determines attention, enthusiasm, and joy of learning or boredom (Burt 2000). Movies provide a highly motivating atmosphere for classroom learning. Once students’ attention is gained, they can, at their ease, acquire language comprehension by coming to understand the grammatical structure, vocabulary, facial expressions and gestures used by a movie’s characters. Thai students tend to focus on and unconsciously speak written English. Movies expose them to authentic, everyday, conversational and spoken language as opposed to textbook-oriented approaches which focus on form rather than essence. They provide realistic and cross-cultural contexts, where learning occurs relatively effortlessly. (King, 2002) They engage students’ emotions
and offer new perspectives. They enable skills, such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing, to be put into practice. Class discussion evolves naturally as students share their opinions, likes and dislikes. This leads easily into an exploration of conceptual linkages and etiologies through simple questions such as ‘why?’ and ‘how?’. Individual reactions to particular scenarios thus lead to dialogue, debate, inspiration and application to daily life.

Movies Selection

It is a challenge to select an appropriate clip, and depends on learning objectives, class situations and students’ schemata. Anderson (1992) mentions risks, such as propaganda, often obscured. Movies can be biased, distorted, partial, uninformed, excessively violent or manipulative. Thus, the teacher’s choice is very significant. Realism, including social and moral issues, is more common in European more than in American movies (Boyatzis, 1994). Contemporary movies with universal standard themes are preferred because they are more relevant to students, and enable them to identify themselves easily. There are some criteria to select movies mentioned by Burt (2000) such as interest, content, clarity of message, pacing, graphics, length of sequence, and availability.

King (2002) proposes four approaches to presenting 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 method where a few scenes are chosen by the teacher from a movie. 4) The whole-film approach where a complete movie is viewed. The single-scene approach is most appropriate where there are limitations on time constraint and students’ abilities. A well-chosen clip, together with a thought-provoking question or pertinent quote, stimulates discussion and interaction. Closed captions, such as easily-to-follow plots, including colloquial language, slang and conversation, create a relaxing learning atmosphere and enable the development of information-processing strategies. However, watching movies without closed captions enhances a tolerance of ambiguity, improves guessing skills using context and clues, promotes the practice of key words and main ideas, motivates students to apply authentic language and increases students’ sense of accomplishment and self-confidence. Different movies can be used to illustrate various themes. For example, Music Box promotes family rapport (Kusumarasdyati, 2004), Green Mile depicts ethical dilemmas, Lion King emphasizes obedience, truthfulness and responsibility, and An Inconvenient Truth highlights global warming.

Methods of Implementation

Implementation follows a three stage model (Kusumarasdyati, 2004):

• Pre-viewing: To prepare students’, scaffolds such as the theme of the movie, key vocabulary, main characters, the script, grammatical structure, scene description and questions to be asked are introduced before viewing.

• While-viewing: While watching, students are expected to answer questions or worksheets, which prompt them to find specific information. A second viewing increases comprehension.

• Post-viewing: Individuals’ opinions, group discussion and class discussion are encouraged and corrected. However, it is more encouraging, if students’ answers are not judged immediately. Further questions like “Why do you think that?” help them to reflect more deeply. When different or contradicting views occur, other perspectives are explored and assessed critically.

Results from search studies

The students’ viewpoints and perspectives were obtained through an exploratory questionnaire following a classroom activity involving a contemporary movie. Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data indicated that students believe that movie was a beneficial adjunct to textbook and lecture content (Downney; Jackson; Puig; Furman, 2003).

Furthermore, Renzi (n.p., n.d.) drawing on seventeen articles written by instructors who used movies in their classrooms, notes unanimous satisfaction with the practical benefits of a film-enhanced course. Renzi states that: 1) movies improve critical thinking skills, 2) “real-world” scenarios enhance students’ ability in practical applications,
3) vivid evidence of students’ levels of engagement and active learning are increased, and 4) group interaction is promoted.

**Challenge and Reality in Classroom**

This study of 80 students from School of Communication Arts in a private university identifies the following characteristics:

- Students tend to simply repeat what teachers say, or using information ready at hand.
- Their answers are based on rote learning and are superficial and subjective.
- Their responses are irrational, shallow, or biased, e.g. “I like/don’t like it or I agree/disagree with that...” without reasons to support their preferences.
- They justify their positions by echoing views from the media, friends, family, culture and society.

Critical thinking skills are meant to be at the heart of educational reform. Our goal is to stimulate deep change in students – to stimulate doubt and questions and seeking out opposing views instead of following the crowd.

**Sharing from my class**

To enable students to distinguish fact from opinion, a small study was done involving using a single scene from the movie Dead Poets’ Society in 2010.

Before viewing, there was an explanation on what fact (objectivity) and opinion (subjectivity) are. Students were then informed of: 1) the purposes of the activity: to distinguish “fact” and “opinion”, and to express opinions, 2) what they were going to watch, Seize The Day on You Tube, 3) what they were expected to do after the first viewing, which was to record “facts”, and then record their “opinions”. The short script and key vocabulary were explained. Useful language used to express opinions was also reviewed. The following was repeated many times: “No right or wrong answers. What I need is your opinion together with your reasons for those opinions.”

During the first viewing, students recorded what they viewed as facts. During the second viewing, they or their personal responses (opinions) and the supporting reasons.

At the post-viewing stage, some students shared their opinions. The researcher offered no comments but asked them further questions and used others’ answers to access deeply imbedded data.

**Figure 3:** Dead Poet’s Society Robin Williams Speech Seize The Day
Source: http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=dead+poet+society&aq=0

**What I found**

All students could distinguish “fact” and “opinion”, which was one of the lesson’s purposes. The way they objectively described a fact was clear, e.g. “I saw a teacher standing on the table and talking.” However, most students’ critical thinking was still at a pre-maturing stage. Referring to Bloom’s taxonomy, the majority of them were struggling between the levels of “knowledge” and “comprehension”. Their reflections included “His teaching is crazy.”, “Teacher wants to explain about different ways you see.”, and “I agree with him because he is creative and has new ideas.” Reasons were scarce, nonexistent or superficial.

**Discussion**

Using movies assisted message delivery. Watching a clip is similar to reading a text but to read a passage, takes more commitment, focus and reflection. Their enthusiasm towards the two activities is different and students learned key concepts via movies more rapidly.

Limitations to using movies to develop critical thinking skills include the long preparation time required, selecting appropriate clips and matching these to learning objectives, language focus and student levels. Culture and language abilities also limit this method. An important technique is to ensure that students understand that viewing a movie, though pleasant, is meant to be a learning experience.
Teaching must balance entertainment.

Our goal is to facilitate our students ascendancy through the hierarchical thinking levels presented earlier. Movies provide a very useful tool in this endeavor.

**Conclusions**

The use of movies to develop students’ creative thinking should be implemented in classroom. Movies can be regarded as a contemporary and timeless instructional tool because they carry universal negative and positive values such as love, relationship and integrity and portray the lives of people, which can be appreciated and learned from. This practical, convenient and low-cost medium can serve the needs of teachers and students, fill the gap between generations, entertain, interest, inspire, and especially help students in the area of language acquisition in a natural way. The expected outcome is sophisticated - to enhance students’ critical thinking skills. This serves the purpose of education, which is to nourish the whole person—particularly both head and heart.

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**References:**


